

# Understanding Battlefield Performance of U.S. Marines Ashore during the Civil War

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**Abstract:** During the American Civil War, U.S. Marines rarely engaged in land operations and even more rarely conducted land-based or amphibious operations involving more than one company. The Marine Corps' lackluster battlefield performance ashore during the Civil War is best understood by examining their poor organization in officer selection, recruiting and retention, ad hoc formations larger than company size, limited collective tactical training, and experience in large-scale ground combat. The focus of this study is on large-scale Marine land operations, involving battalion-size elements assembled on an ad hoc basis and led by either U.S. Navy officers or U.S. Army officers, to analyze Marines' battlefield performance ashore.

**Keywords:** Civil War, U.S. Marines, large-scale ground combat, ad hoc formations, tactical training, Marine performance ashore

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The U.S. Marine Corps' role in the American Civil War largely followed that of its previous service, lacking much distinction in new roles or tactical application. Marines served primarily in a security role for the U.S. Navy, both guarding shipyards and protecting naval crews from hostile boarding, as well as serving as backup gun crews or as boarding parties and deck sharpshooters during close fighting, while enforcing discipline when afloat. On rare occasions, extremely small-scale and short in

duration and distance, Marines engaged in land operations, and on even rarer occasions they conducted land-based or amphibious operations involving more than one company. The Marine Corps' lackluster battlefield performance ashore during the Civil War is best understood by examining their poor organization in officer selection, recruiting and retention, ad hoc formations larger than company size, limited collective tactical training, and experience in large-scale ground combat. In an overall assessment of Marines' performance ashore, when led by naval officers—as was often the case—Marines performed poorly. However, when incorporated alongside an experienced U.S. Army force, regardless of size or composition, the Marines and their officers' performance notably improved, when compared to fighting alongside an inexperienced Army force.

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as multicompany) elements. Ad hoc formations assembled temporarily from ship crews and put ashore for duty is the primary example for the study. While semipermanent battalion-size formations were created, they generally were not deliberately employed in large-scale ground combat. These formations in no way resembled official codified, regimental units common from the twentieth century onward, but rather were collections of Marines from other assignments gathered into a more special-purpose task-organized or provisional type of formation.

The Marine Corps had a minor history of battalion-level land combat operations prior to the American Civil War. After the founding of the Corps in 1775 during the Revolutionary War, Marine battalions fought in the assault on the Bahamas and with General George Washington's army in the battles of Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey. During the War of 1812, a Marine battalion served with distinction at the Battle of Bladensburg (which was otherwise viewed as a fiasco) before the British burned Washington, DC. During the Florida Seminole Wars in 1836, two Marine battalions were attached to the Army for service, and most notably during the Mexican-American War, a Marine battalion served with Major General Winfield Scott's Mexico City campaign in 1847.<sup>1</sup> The Civil War engagements examined in this study include First Battle of Bull Run (21 July 1861), the battles of Honey Hill (30 November 1864) and Tulifinny (6–9 December 1864), and the campaign against Fort Fisher (December 1864–January 1865). These fights exemplify the characteristics of Civil War-era Marine organization, training, employment, and experience from which to draw broader analysis for Marines' battlefield performance ashore. This examination will provide an analytical base for understanding the impacts

of the limited training received on formal, mass infantry tactics and the impact of ad hoc or provisionally organized Marine formations that were haphazardly combined prior to decisive ground combat. The leadership and recruitment challenges the Corps faced during this period further illuminate the impressive record of bravery, heroism, discipline, and determinism of individual and small groups of Marines, even if under a broader lackluster organizational performance ashore.

At the start of the war, the U.S. Navy possessed 90 ships, with 42 of them commissioned naval vessels and only 3 in local waters; the rest were spread abroad. It was a decidedly blue-water Navy at the onset of a war that would demand a brown-water fleet for operations along coastlines, small inlets, and riverways against an enemy possessing no fleet. Within a year of opening hostilities, the U.S. Navy ballooned to 300 ships, and virtually all ships abroad were recalled to take part in the Service's major strategic role of the war: blockading 3,500 miles of Southern coastline. By May 1862, of the nine secessionist major ports, six were captured or closed off; only ports in Charleston, South Carolina; Wilmington, North Carolina; and Mobile, Alabama, remained open. The Navy also rapidly expanded its riverine and small craft force to support its additional role in the U.S. strategy of joint operations with the Army. In this overarching approach, the Marine Corps saw no broad-based, deliberately changed role; its meager expansion only occurred in pace with requirements to fulfill its shipboard duties as the Navy's fleet size increased, typical of its prewar roles and mission.<sup>2</sup>

The Corps' major contribution was largely to serve as backup gun crews, work Navy shipyard garrison duty, and provide security and discipline on ships; however, Marines did participate in small raids, typically led by naval officers for actions such as burning rebel ships, and they fought in combined assaults with the Army in several significant, isolated land engagements and joint coastal operations. During the

<sup>1</sup> For more on the Revolutionary War, see Charles R. Smith, *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1975), 51–57, 87–92, 94–105. For more on the War of 1812, see Charles P. Neimeyer, *The Chesapeake Campaign, 1813–1814* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2014), 24, 3, 34, 36–39, 44–45, 49. For more on the Seminole Wars and Mexican-American War, see Gabrielle M. Neufeld Santelli, *Marines in the Mexican War* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1991), 10, 21, 35–47.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93–94, 103.

initial days of Southern states' secession, the Marine Corps was used as a rapid reaction force occupying key coastal and waterway defensive fortifications and naval yards. In an early example of joint coastal operations, Marines and sailors, serving in the Chesapeake flotilla, embarked on the Hatteras expedition with Army forces under Major General Benjamin F. Butler intending to take rebel-held Fort Clark and Fort Hatteras to secure the Hatteras Inlet of North Carolina. After landing approximately 300 troops on 29 August 1861, the expedition inexplicably halted in indecision that would later become an unwelcome hallmark of Butler's leadership. However, the 300 soldiers and Marines (gathered from the Marine security details of the USS *Minnesota* [1855 frigate], *Cumberland* [1842 frigate], and *Wabash* [1855 screw frigate]) continued. While Fort Clark was found evacuated, the more-impressive and -defensible Fort Hatteras remained fully manned. The following morning, after a miserable night in the rain outside the ramparts, Butler's force was rewarded by a stray lightning strike igniting the Fort Hatteras magazine, resulting in the garrison's rapid surrender and resolving the expedition successfully without a true battlefield test of the joint force on land.<sup>3</sup>

While these garrison and security duties and small-scale raids typified the Corps' usage ashore during the war, they were not the only land combat Marines experienced, nor are they the focus of this study. A brief examination of Marine combat in multicompany, battalion-size land and coastal operations follows to better understand the factors of Marine performance in large-scale land combat operations and their results.

## Experiences

Examining the major land combat operations Marines participated in chronologically assists in identifying commonalities in battlefield performance factors and analyzing them. A grounded foundation in the status of the Marine Corps at the opening of hostilities and then the evolution of its involvement in land-based

combat is an important foundation from which to begin any examination. The prewar strength of the Corps rested at around 1,800 Marines. Compared to its contemporary land-based service, it was 10 percent of the Army's size and only 20 percent of the Navy's.<sup>4</sup> The Corps' adjutant inspector report from 2 November 1860 listed its strength at 1,775 Marines, with 63 officers, 252 noncommissioned officers (NCOs), 113 musicians, and 1,347 privates. At the outbreak of the war, two-thirds of these Marines were serving on naval ships spread across the seas. As the Corps rapidly expanded with the looming war, recruitment barely filled more than half the new enlistments needed to support just the new Navy ships commissioning, much less provide for a large Marine land combat-centric force. Sea duty was definitively the priority for the Marine Corps with the able-bodied, experienced, and reliable sergeants and Marines first going to the ships, then to the Marine barracks, and finally, to any joint expeditions with the Army.<sup>5</sup>

A letter from Private J. Ferris Shoemaker to his brother adequately explained the Marine Corps' organizational structure:

There is no such thing in the Marine Corps as an organized company. We are all one company . . . divided into nominal companies so as to have some regularity in our movements. . . . When a squad is wanted to put on a ship as guard, the number is chosen from the whole number in the Barracks, so you see that I am just as likely to be sent off alone as with my old acquaintances.<sup>6</sup>

This illuminates a key factor in the struggles of large-scale land combat for Marines: haphazard and temporary organization. Although there were a few

<sup>4</sup> Gerald S. Henig, "Marines Fighting Marines: The Battle of Drewry's Bluff," *Naval History Magazine* 23, no. 3 (June 2009).

<sup>5</sup> "Report of the Secretary of the Navy," in *Message from the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Thirty-sixth Congress*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: George W. Bowman, 1860), 382–85.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in David M. Sullivan, *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War—The Second Year* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1997), 211, hereafter Sullivan, *The Second Year*.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *United States Marines at Harper's Ferry and in the Civil War* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1983), 21, 9–11.

examples of battalion- and company-size Marine formations drilling, training, and staying together for use as a cohesive unit, it was rare, and it was even rarer for these special-purpose task-organized formations to be employed, even when formed. Most Marines' large-scale land combat experience in the Civil War came from the ad hoc formations cobbled together from the Marine guard detachments on nearby Navy ships. Of note, Marines were not the only ones who found themselves used in a manner for which they were not organized, trained, or designed; some soldiers experienced "marine" duties, as exemplified by three Army infantry regiments who provided "marines" to the Mississippi Squadron courtesy of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant. These soldiers received commendations from Rear Admiral David D. Porter, who wrote of "their good conduct, bravery in action, and attention to their duties. . . . I . . . deem myself fortunate in having had detailed for the squadron, so brave and efficient a party of men. . . . I take pleasure in paying this just tribute to them, and hope they will continue to merit approval, as they have hitherto done."<sup>7</sup> Commander James P. Foster also praised these soldier-marines stating, "The officers and the other gun's crew, and the marines acted their part bravely, without exception."<sup>8</sup>

### ***First Battle of Bull Run, 21 July 1861***

The first time Marines found themselves pressed into large-scale land combat during the Civil War was the First Battle of Bull Run. It was one of the Corps' largest organized organic contributions to land combat during the war. The Corps sent a full battalion of 12 officers and 336 enlisted, led by Major John G. Reynolds, to support Army captain Charles Griffin's artillery battery.<sup>9</sup> The order for Marine participation at Bull Run stated, "You will be pleased to detail from the barracks four companies of eighty men each, the whole under command of Major Reynolds . . . for tem-

porary field service under Brig. General [Irvin] McDowell, to whom Major Reynolds will report."<sup>10</sup> The Marine Corps was last in priority for new equipment when the war broke out. Instead of the requested new rifled muskets, the Marines received passed-down smoothbore muskets from the War Department. Only six of the Marine officers present at Bull Run had any combat experience. Only seven privates had been in the Corps before the firing on Fort Sumter; some had less than a week's training before Bull Run.<sup>11</sup>

A letter from Lieutenant Robert E. Hitchcock to his parents provides details on the Marine battalion's participation at First Bull Run.

So tomorrow morning will see me and five other Lieuts. With 300 Marines (raw recruits in every sense of the term) on our way to Fairfax Court House to take part in a bloody battle. . . . This is unexpected of us and the Marines are not fit to go into the field, for every man of them is as raw as you please, not more than a hundred of them have been here over three weeks. We have no camp equipage of any kind, not even tents, and after all this, we are expected to take the brunt of the battle. . . . We shall do as well as we can under the circumstances; just think of it, 300 raw men in the field! We shall drill all day, and work hard.<sup>12</sup>

At every halt along the march, during the day in camp and each night for two days leading up to the battle, Major Reynolds drilled his ad hoc Marine battalion; it was all he could do.<sup>13</sup> The Marines were assigned to support Army artillery batteries, and the dismounted Marines struggled to keep up with the mounted artillery's pace on the 26 miles (42 kilometers) from Washington, DC, to Manassas, Virginia. After three days

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David M. Sullivan, *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War—The Third Year* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1998), 107, hereafter Sullivan, *The Third Year*.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Nalty, *United States Marines at Harpers Ferry*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Sullivan, *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War—The First Year* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1997), 116, hereafter Sullivan, *The First Year*.

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 102, 120–21.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 116–17.

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 123–25.

of rest in Manassas, on 21 July, Major Reynolds and Captain Griffin pushed forward late in the morning to join the fight unfolding at Bull Run.<sup>14</sup>

The Marines followed the Army batteries as they pushed forward at 1400 to the high ground. Once on Henry Hill, the Marines experienced their first Civil War combat as they jogged to keep up with the horse-drawn artillery. After arriving on the hill, the Marines were made to rest behind the guns. In the confusion of the fight, enemy infantry was mistaken by some Army officers as friendly troops as they approached. Confusion ended when the infantry unleashed a devastating volley into the artillery and Marines. Three times the Marines wavered and Major Reynolds rallied them, displaying individual bravery and professionalism. Even so, the Army infantry accompanying the Marines and artillery broke under the fire and threat of enemy cavalry. The Marines attempted to resist, but enemy fire and the disorder of mixed troops caused their lines to break and they fell back down the hill.<sup>15</sup>

The Marines suffered comparatively fewer casualties than the leading Army brigades—reportedly as few as three—when they first left the concealment of woods and took their place behind the battery. Army brigadier general Andrew Porter positively noted of the Marines' conduct that "through constant exertions of their officers [they] had been brought to a fine military appearance."<sup>16</sup> In a second attempt to advance up Henry Hill to regain the high ground and abandoned artillery, the Marine officers rallied the stragglers and joined with the 14th Brooklyn (properly, 84th New York Volunteers) as it entered the fight. With concentrated enemy fire, the Marines and 14th Brooklyn infantry discipline cracked again, retreating back down the hill in disorder as the officers attempted to stop them.<sup>17</sup> After the second break, the enemy started to pursue the retreating U.S. forces. Rebel surgeon Daniel M. Conrad noted, "The green pines were filled with the 79th Highlanders [New York Infantry Regiment]

and the red-breeched Brooklyn Zouaves [5th New York Infantry], but the only men that were killed and wounded twenty or thirty yards behind and in the rear of our lines were the United States Marines."<sup>18</sup> While much is made of this statement, its context is largely lost; it implies broad assumptions made by an enemy medical officer post-battle on observed locations of bodies of the Marines.

The retreating Marines gathered at the crossroads at the foot of Henry Hill with a chaotic mix of U.S. infantry brigades. They reformed with the 14th Brooklyn before attempting to advance again. However, more retreating U.S. troops collided with the reorganizing mass, and in the midst of the Marines' third attempt to secure Henry Hill, they were pushed back by a determined enemy advance and pulled into the general U.S. retreat. A portion of the Marine battalion formed part of the rear guard as the U.S. forces retreated in abject disorder and panic. Once relieved by another New York militia unit, the Marines all joined the disjointed retreating mass back to Washington. During the retreat, the Marines lost all sense of order, with officers separated from their troops.<sup>19</sup> During the disorganized rout, the Marines tossed aside all manner of equipment and gear that had been so difficult to procure prior to the fight, including muskets, cartridge boxes, canteens, and blankets. On 24 July, Colonel Harris requested the Marine battalion be detached from service with the Army and returned to their traditional duties. His request was granted immediately.<sup>20</sup> Days after the battle, Marine lieutenant William H. Carter wrote home to his mother, "We lost one Officer Lieut. Hitchcock and two wounded, and 30 men and got licked awfully. We have got to do better than we did at Bull Run or we will be defeated at all times."<sup>21</sup>

Even in light of this disastrous experience, the Marine Corps Commandant continued to receive willing and ardently patriotic Marines soliciting to participate ashore. Importantly, shipboard Marines

<sup>14</sup> *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 383–85, 391.

<sup>15</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 2, 385, 392.

<sup>16</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 2, 383.

<sup>17</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 138–39.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 139–40.

<sup>19</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 141–42, 144.

<sup>20</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 145, 151.

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 146.

who had conducted ground infantry tactical drill petitioned Colonel Harris to go ashore to participate with the Army, one writing of his men on the USS *Macedonian* (1836 frigate) that “they are well instructed in Light Inf. Tactics and the drill for Skirmishers which they have practiced on shore at Vera Cruz. . . . I most earnestly ask that you will not refuse me this opportunity of serving my country in a more useful manner than at present and in the position of a true soldier, in the field.” Similarly, a group of Marine veterans of the recent Mexican-American War and frontier conflicts serving aboard the USS *Richmond* (1860 steam sloop) wrote a group letter stating: “Understanding that a Marine Battalion has gone into the field, we earnestly and respectfully request that we may be allowed to join it . . . having been in the field before in Mexico and Indian Wars and prefer active service. There are a number of recruits in the Barracks who would willingly take our place on board ship and do ship duty equally well.”<sup>22</sup> They could not have known that a long war had just begun and that Marines would have many more opportunities to serve their country. The Bull Run engagement reflected largely on inexperience and lack of training and preparedness for combat of both officers and enlisted, alongside the deprioritization of weaponry for the Marines with their smoothbore muskets, resulting in poor equipping. Even so, the action highlighted inherent Marine steadfastness in its leadership and devotion to sacrifice among the rank-and-file even amidst the overall inexperience and failed execution.

### ***Assault on Fort Sumter, 8 September 1863***

It was nearly two years before the next major operation was conducted by a multicompany Marine formation fighting ashore. In fall 1863, Admiral John A. Dahlgren undertook an expedition to retake Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor using a provisional Marine battalion that had been unable to participate in the Army’s Battery Wagner operations earlier that year. The battalion was a semipermanent, not for-

mally designated or organized, formation of detached Marines from various garrison and ship duty. Whereas most Marine battalions ashore during the war came from expediently formed battalions from nearby Navy squadrons for immediate action and once complete returned to their ships, this was an example of a battalion formed for extended duty of detached Marines from various duties around the United States, not just the immediately colocated Navy squadron. Marine officers John G. Reynolds and Jacob W. Zeilin experimented with this type of semipermanent Marine battalion for combat ashore, contributing their previous experience at Bull Run to these formations. However, few of this type of battalion were ever employed; in fact, both officers served in such a battalion earlier in the war, under Rear Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont, that was never employed before its disbandment.<sup>23</sup> Reynolds and Zeilin, arguably the most experienced of the Marines in large-scale combat ashore, now found themselves involved in the latest manifestation of this experimental formation under Dahlgren. To do this, Dahlgren called on the formation of the Marine battalion at their base in Port Royal, South Carolina, under Major Zeilin. Zeilin responded to Dahlgren’s request for Marine battalion volunteers for the operations against Fort Sumter: “I can not [*sic*] say whether they are such as you require or not, but they are the best I have.”<sup>24</sup> Zeilin’s faith in his Marines’ training and abilities for such a joint amphibious venture was wanting. Perhaps this moroseness was also attached to Zeilin’s personal state, as he fell sick and was ordered back to Washington to be replaced by now-lieutenant colonel Reynolds. Until Reynolds’s arrival, another Bull Run veteran, the senior shipboard Marine commander, Captain E. McDonald Reynolds, replaced Zeilin to lead the battalion. On 8 September, Captain Reynolds organized his force into three ad hoc companies and loaded them into small boats along with sailors, intending to conduct a complex nighttime assault. The rebels, having secured copies of

<sup>22</sup> The second USS *Macedonian* was built on the keel of the first ship of the same name. As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 152–53.

<sup>23</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies on the War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 12 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 223, 233, 235–36, 658–59, hereafter *ORN*.

<sup>24</sup> *ORN*, series 1, vol. 14, 518.

the U.S. signal code books, read the signals and anticipated the pending assault on Fort Sumter. The intercepted signals were also confirmed by observations of the congregating small boats in the harbor before the attack. Rockets fired by the fort's defenders lit up the clear sky and lanterns and lights illuminated the confused and chaotic boats in their approach to Sumter. The U.S. Marines and sailors valiantly fired back but the enemy's concentrated fire overwhelmed them.<sup>25</sup>

The resulting assault was a chaotic, uncoordinated, tragic disaster for the Marines. In the darkness and silence required of surprise at night, some Marine officers did not even know if any boats made it to Fort Sumter; others were unsure if the attack was even still planned. By the time the assault was terminated and the Marines withdrew, most boats were still lost and aimlessly drifting around the base of Fort Sumter. Meanwhile, 20 Marines under Lieutenant Percival C. Pope had landed. Such a small force, separated from any support and in confusion, was easily repelled by rebels along Sumter's parapets. In these disparate and scattered small groups, some landings such as Pope's were made disjointedly by nearly half the attacking force, about 90–100 men. Eleven of the 25 boats landed on Fort Sumter. U.S. losses included 4 killed, 20 wounded, and 106 prisoners, 11 of which were officers. Forty-four casualties total were from the Marine battalion.<sup>26</sup>

The attack failed in 20 furious minutes. U.S. forces lacked knowledge of Fort Sumter's outer and inner works or landing points and were unable to scale the fort's walls. Participants bemoaned a lack of time to properly organize and train the ad hoc landing force and the inability to withstand a counterattack or the enemy land batteries had Fort Sumter been successfully seized. On 27 November 1863, the remnants of the Marine battalion held a review and departed north to be broken up and fill the ranks of Marine guard detachments on the northern squadron ships, but not before Dahlgren first filled his squadron's

shipboard vacancies with the disbanding Marines.<sup>27</sup> While the attempted assault on Fort Sumter was an unmitigated disaster for the participating Marines and sailors, it was not a reflection on them but rather on an overly complex plan that was executed in a difficult environment at night against a prepared enemy, which negated the critical component of surprise. Lack of rehearsals stands out as one of the operation's key faults that can be directly held against Marine and Navy leadership. Even so, the assault likely would have failed regardless, though it may possibly have been less costly had they been better prepared, coordinated, and trained.

This experiment with a provisional Marine battalion organized, trained, and designed for organic multicompany maneuvers ashore was disbanded, with its forces broken up again and spread out among the fleet to support the Navy ships, signaling a return to the previous methodology of creating ad hoc formations of Marines for large-scale service ashore by combining various elements from ship detachments for a particular operation. The United States returned to a methodology that had not worked out very well before only to try it again at one of the largest joint Marine-Army operations of the war in the support of Major General William T. Sherman's southern campaign.

### ***Honey Hill, 30 November–1 December 1864, and Tulifinny Crossroads, 6 December 1864***

Sherman's expedition to sever the railroad between Charleston and Savannah saw an entire Marine battalion-size force fight alongside the Army. Marine lieutenant George G. Stoddard led the battalion as part of a fleet brigade, so called because the Marines came from the offshore Navy squadron, supporting the Army troops. On 29 November, the combined force landed at Boyd's Neck, South Carolina. This 493-man fleet brigade comprised a naval artillery battalion, a naval infantry battalion, and the Marine bat-

<sup>25</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 14, 622–26, 628–30, 633–34; and Thomas H. Stevens, "The Boat Attack on Sumter," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Retreat with Honor*, vol. 4 (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, 1983), 49–51.

<sup>26</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 14, 622–26, 628–30, 633–34; and Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 71, 76–77, 80, 86.

<sup>27</sup> John Johnson, "The Confederate Defense of Fort Sumter," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Retreat with Honor*, 26; Stevens, "The Boat Attack on Sumter," 49; and ORN, series 1, vol. 15, 104.

talion, each making up about one-third of the force.<sup>28</sup> On 1 December, they engaged the first significant rebel resistance at Honey Hill. Fighting through the swampy terrain, the Marines held their line under intense firing until midafternoon. As the day waned, the joint U.S. forces fell back as a whole. During the fighting at Honey Hill, which some reports indicated lasted six to seven hours, the Marine battalion's performance equaled that of the other Army regiments. The Marines fought mostly along the expedition's flank, first with the 127th New York Infantry Regiment during the initial contact but mostly integrated with the largely African-American units on the right of the U.S. lines. Low on ammunition, the U.S. forces retreated under cover of darkness.<sup>29</sup> Commander George H. Preble, overall commander of Dahlgren's fleet brigade, reported, "Considering that marines were taken from the vessels of the squadron, scattered on the blockade, and had been formed into a battalion only two days previous, and that all the commanding officers were sergeants, I think their conduct creditable to the Corps."<sup>30</sup>

Five days after the fighting at Honey Hill, the expedition tried again, pushing toward Tulifinny Crossroads, only a kilometer or so from the railroad they were attempting to cut. The rebels beat back the U.S. attempt again. After the Marines fell back, they entrenched with hasty earthworks. On 9 December, the United States made a final attempt to cut the supply lines from Charleston to Savannah, this time not by tearing up the railroads but by shelling the railroads with long-range artillery. The Marines moved through the waist-deep swamp along with the Army infantry and sailors to fight through the enemy lines just far enough to clear a path for the artillery to be able to range the railroad. The ad hoc fleet brigade of sailors and Marines again held their own equal to the infantry. At Tulifinny, the Marines nestled into the main U.S. line, fully incorporated into the Army formation with New York regiments on either side of them, mutually supportive. This placement among

the Army infantry perhaps served as an inspiration and an example for the inexperienced Marine battalion.<sup>31</sup> The Marines made it within 50 yards of the enemy line before they opened fire as they emerged from the swamp. As the artillery fired, confusion reigned, and the U.S. ground forces began retreating, but the Marines never received the order to fall back and naturally continued to press their advance. As the Marines belatedly realized what was happening, the rebels were advancing from their works in an attempt to cut them off. Stoddard led his Marines deeper into the swamp, avoiding the pursuing rebel infantry and heading toward the river. Using the Tulifinny River as a guide, Stoddard led his Marines back along the riverbank, dodging multiple enemy patrols until he reached the U.S. lines. The 9 December attempt to destroy the railroad by artillery was the final effort. Poor weather conditions terminated the operation by the end of the month.<sup>32</sup>

The Army's coast division, commanded by Brigadier General John P. Hatch, praised the fleet brigade when he departed the region after the Honey Hill and Tulifinny River battles, messaging "to the brigade that its gallantry in action and good conduct . . . won from all the land forces with which it served the highest praises . . . if any jealousy had previously existed between the different branches . . . all that was wanting was a chance to efface it as a better knowledge of each other."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Hatch's brigade commanders complimented the ad hoc naval force. Brigadier General Edward E. Potter wrote, "In the sharply contested affair of Dec. 6th, Marines and battalion of Sailor Infantry . . . bore a conspicuous part. I had every opportunity to observe the gallantry of your command in the field." The department commander, Major General John G. Foster wrote, "At the Battle of Honey Hill, and the engagements upon Devaux's Neck [South Carolina] . . . your force aided in a great degree to ensure our success, and were in fact, under

<sup>28</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 111.

<sup>29</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 74, 76–81.

<sup>30</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 77.

<sup>31</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 81–90.

<sup>32</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 99–102.

<sup>33</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 109.



the circumstances, invaluable.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, though largely a failure, the expedition of Honey Hill and Tullifinny exemplified one of the war’s best cases of joint operations between the Marines and the Army and one of the Marines’ best performances fighting ashore in large-scale ground combat. Placing the Marine formation among more experienced Army units likely contributed to this performance. The Marine officers demonstrated distinctive, strong leadership and the rank-and-file displayed determination and bravery while under fire. Without adopting some of these practices, the next large-scale joint operation against Fort Fisher faced critical flaws in its organization and execution in its distinct delineation and coordination between the naval forces on land and the Army efforts.

### ***Fort Fisher, 25–27 December 1864 and 13–14 January 1865***

Naval strategy and shoreline operations have been asserted to be a critical part of the U.S. strategy to win the war by pressuring the rebel states on every side, and the campaign against Fort Fisher on the North Carolina coast, protecting one of the last blockade-running harbors of the rebellion, contributes significantly to this narrative. Part of the strategy resulted in the rebels being forced to spread thin, protecting the entire shoreline from U.S. attack, which concurrently reduced the Southern field armies. The secessionists adopted a “cordon strategy defense,” intending to protect all their newly declared confederacy at once and attempting to defend their source of recruitment and supply, demonstrate their claim to sovereignty, and preserve slavery. This cordon approach—perimeter defense—caused the dispersal of forces by necessity.<sup>35</sup> The sealing of Southern shorelines and ports reduced rebel access to materiel and equipment needed for the war from foreign markets. To seize Fort Fisher entailed a large amphibious effort combining naval assets (including landing Marines) with Army units. By December 1864, the

waterway and coastal pressures of U.S. operations reduced remaining major Southern deep-sea ports to two: Wilmington, North Carolina, and Charleston, South Carolina. As previously examined, Charleston Harbor remained defiantly rebellious even after amphibious efforts against Fort Sumter and land-based operations along the various islands and inlets around the major port city. Wilmington then became the U.S. military’s next target.<sup>36</sup>

Although only one of two forts that controlled entrance up the Cape Fear River to the Wilmington port, Fort Fisher was the key to the defense of Wilmington, and arguably one of the most advanced fortifications of the time. Largely due to the efforts of Fort Fisher’s commander Colonel William Lamb and Major General William Henry Chase Whiting’s continual efforts, the layout and defenses of the fort were impressive. Fort Fisher possessed nearly 4,000-foot-long walls, forming a numeral seven with the top line stretching horizontally for nearly 1,000 feet across the peninsula known as Confederate Point, choking the entrance of the Cape Fear River. The longer vertical line reached down parallel to the peninsula for nearly 3,000 feet. The top line of the fort protected Fort Fisher against land attack from up the peninsula while the vertical line faced the sea. An attack from the rear of the fort’s unprotected side was unlikely since attack from that direction would require the attackers to pass the fort into New Inlet. Separate from the fort proper was a self-contained redoubt, a purpose-built fallback point and ferrying site for potential replacements called Battery Buchanan. It was meant to be Fort Fisher’s last stand.<sup>37</sup>

Fort Fisher’s defenses included a minefield, infantry behind log and earth palisades overlooking open approaches, and a 23-foot rampart supported by 24 guns and mortars, with a garrison of 1,000 total infantry, engineers, and artillerymen. The traverses forming the bulk of the fort’s outer wall structure

<sup>34</sup> As quoted in David M. Sullivan, *The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War—The Final Year* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 2000), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Stoker, *The Grand Design*, 19, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Gary J. Ohls, “Fort Fisher: Amphibious Victory in the American Civil War,” *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 82–84.

<sup>37</sup> Ohls, “Fort Fisher,” 85–86; *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 46, part 2, 60, 67; and William Lamb, “The Defense of Fort Fisher,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Retreat with Honor*, vol. 4, 643.

were nearly self-contained mounds, linking the various cannons. The seaside structures were half the size of the land-facing ones, since they were largely built to survive ricochet shots skipping off the water from a naval bombardment, not a land assault from the water's edge. The palisade stretched in front of the land face of the fort 50 feet across the beach to the water's edge, 20 feet high and 25 feet thick on a 45-degree slope, and was topped with marshy grass. It was made of sharpened wooden stakes nine feet tall. Fort Fisher's palisade was 20 yards from the base of the earthworks. Although the arrival of Major General Robert F. Hoke's division from Virginia to support the defense of Wilmington remained significant, they remained too far north around Wilmington, limiting their impact to the Fort Fisher defense.<sup>38</sup>

In December 1864, Grant tasked Butler's Army of the James to reduce Fort Fisher to close Wilmington's port with naval commander David D. Porter, who led the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron in support. Working with Porter, Grant's plan involved moving 6,500 soldiers from Bermuda Hundred, a portion of land enclosed by the James River in Virginia, down to North Carolina close enough to take action against Fort Fisher. After Porter's naval bombardment weakened the defenses, Butler's soldiers under local command of Brigadier General Godfrey Weitzel would storm the fort.

Disjointed coordination of support from Porter's ships led to an intermittent and largely ineffectual naval bombardment. A cautious Weitzel halted within 800 yards of the fort with only half of his landing force ashore—around 3,000 soldiers—after skirmishers met resistance 500 yards from the base. An indecisive Weitzel met with an exceedingly cautious Butler, who had unexpectedly decided to accompany the expedition personally. The landing force suddenly re-embarked as a result of this meeting and the assault

on Fisher was called off after 48 hours of standoff without even an attempt to storm the fort.<sup>39</sup>

The failed 25–27 December 1864 first Battle of Fort Fisher led to another attempt when a determined Grant fired Butler and emphatically ordered Major General Alfred H. Terry, with Porter in support again, to take Fisher and choke off Wilmington. On 13 January, the second battle began with Terry leading the land element and Porter still in command of the seaborne forces. At 0800, the Navy began its bombardment and from 0830 to 1400 they landed 8,000 troops north of the fort, including Porter's ad hoc assembled naval brigade of sailors and Marines from his naval squadron crews offshore. The Naval Brigade comprised 1,600 sailors with 400 Marines from elements of 35 of the fleet's 60 ships. The sailors and Marines were grouped into three divisions according to how the ships were organized within the fleet. Each division was to be supported by a Marine company led by a junior officer to provide supporting fire to the bulk Navy sailor assaulters.<sup>40</sup>

Porter's orders on 4 January for the Naval Brigade's assault read

That we may have a share in the assault when it takes place. . . . The sailors will be armed with cutlasses, well sharpened, and with revolvers. . . . The Marines will form in the rear and cover the sailors. While the soldiers are going over the parapets in the front, the sailors will take the sea face. . . . We can land 2,000 men from the fleet and not feel it. Two thousand active men from the fleet will carry the day.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, Porter's 15 January orders for the landing force further specified the role of the Marines: "No move is to be made forward until the army charges, when the navy is to assault the sea . . . going over with

<sup>38</sup> Charles M. Robinson III, *Hurricane of Fire: The Union Assault on Fort Fisher* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 66; Lamb, "The Defense of Fort Fisher," 643; and *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 46, part 1, 407–8.

<sup>39</sup> Ohls, "Fort Fisher: Amphibious Victory," 86–88.

<sup>40</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 46, part 1, 405–6 and series 1, vol. 46, part 2, 128–29; and Thomas O. Selfridge Jr., "The Navy at Fort Fisher," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Retreat with Honor*, vol. 4, 659.

<sup>41</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 427.

cutlasses drawn and revolvers in hand. The Marine will follow after.<sup>42</sup> This contributed to part of Porter's plan involving the Marines seizing the parapets, firing inside at the defenders while the sailors penetrated the ramparts and attacked the defenders in close combat, explaining the armament of pistols and cutlasses.

Terry divided his force to block Hoke's forces, positioned closer to Wilmington to the north, while he pivoted the rest to assault Fort Fisher by land. By 0800 on 14 January, Terry was prepared to focus on the assault. The ad hoc naval brigade was armed with swords, pistols, carbines, and rifles and was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Kidder Randolph Breese. Though not officially under Terry's command, this naval amphibious force formed the left flank of his advance. Navy lieutenant George Dewey commented on the choice of weapons, stating they "evidently were chosen with the idea that storming the face of the strongest work in the civil war was the same sort of operation as boarding a frigate in 1812."<sup>43</sup>

By 1100 on 15 January, Porter's command initiated preparatory fires on the fort. Although meant to be in place by 1400, Terry's land forces took extra time getting into final assault positions and at 1500 signaled to the fleet to shift its fires as his two-pronged assault kicked off. The Army forces made better progress while the naval brigade on the left faced the bulk of the rebel forces, who had mistakenly identified it as the main effort. The naval gunfire destroyed all the enemy guns along the north wall facing the land force, destroyed the palisade, and churned the minefield, assisting the assault. Fort Fisher's commander noted succinctly that with practice from the failed assault, the U.S. Navy's gunnery had improved.<sup>44</sup>

Modifying the original plan, the Marines were placed in rifle pits to support the sailors' charge. Captain Dawson's Marines were pressed forward before they could be fully organized after the landing. He reported, "I had to move off without time to equalize companies, to number them off for facing and march-

ing; to select sergeants to replace officers, or post the guides of a single company or platoon."<sup>45</sup> The Marine forces divided into two detachments under Lieutenant Louis E. Fagan and Captain Lucien L. Dawson. However, Breese's altered plan, ordering the Marines from the freshly dug rifle pits onto the beach with the sailors, jumbled Marines together with the sailors or further divided detachments as Marine officers tried to control them in the growing mass of bodies.<sup>46</sup>

The sailors formed up into three waves, but miscommunication forced them up to the left of the Marines instead of going through them. Confusion also led to uncertainty in coordinating with the Army assault. The naval brigade's courier received advice from the lead Army brigade commander as he coordinated the assault on the beach, telling him the naval force was "too compactly formed—your front is too narrow for the depth of your column. To go into action as your men are now formed places you under a great disadvantage. . . . If you go forward as you are you will be fearfully punished . . . the only good your column will do will be to receive the fire which otherwise would come to our lines."<sup>47</sup> His experienced warning was rebuffed and went unheeded. Further issue arose when Captain Dawson thought he had been ordered to join the assault, leaving only Fagan's detachment to provide the covering fire from the rifle pits to the assault. Though supported as best as Fagan's Marines could, the naval brigade assault failed to breach Fort Fisher's walls.<sup>48</sup>

The naval brigade tried multiple unsuccessful charges, taking brutal fire from the ramparts. Unable to breach the fort, its attacks failed. The sand was ankle deep, slowing down any quick movement, and their blue uniforms made the sailors stand out against the white sands. A seaman stated, "I never saw men fall so fast in my life. I cannot Describe it with pen and paper."<sup>49</sup> The shifted naval brigade ended up charging toward the northeast bastion of Fort Fisher

<sup>42</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 429–30.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 148.

<sup>44</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 46, part 1, 396–97; and Lamb, "The Defense of Fort Fisher," 647, 649.

<sup>45</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 576.

<sup>46</sup> Sullivan, *The Final Year*, 179.

<sup>47</sup> As quoted in Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 162.

<sup>48</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 576–84.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted in Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 166.

near the stretch of the palisades between the fort's embankments and the ocean, the strongest portion of the fort.<sup>50</sup>

In the excitement of the attack, the officers migrated to the front of the mixed column as it stalled against the palisade, leaving the bulk of the divisions behind leaderless. The inexperienced naval force stacked up into one chaotic mass under the enemy fire, as the three divisions—each separated by their attached Marine companies—became comingled. Once huddled against the palisade and under the murderous enemy fire, the sailors could not find a way in, as they lacked proper equipment to dismantle the massive wooden stakes. The renewed naval bombardment meant to support the Army's assault trapped the remaining sailors and Marines against the palisades for fear of being killed by their own ships' guns.<sup>51</sup>

In the confusion, many Marines got carried away and followed the sailors toward the fort, ending up trapped with them at the palisade or repulsed back to the beach, while Dawson held on to some Marines and attempted to provide supporting fire until sunset from the slope between the beach and the fort.<sup>52</sup> Lamb wrote, "The heroic bravery of officers . . . could not restrain the men from panic and retreat . . . we witnessed what had never been seen before, a disorderly rout of American sailors and marines."<sup>53</sup>

Dawson collected two companies of Marines to answer a request from Terry for forces to occupy the right of his lines to free up some of his own regiments to add to the Army's assault. Around 1800, Terry's infantry breached Fort Fisher. As it grew dark, the remaining Marines and sailors huddled against the palisades drifted back up the beach in small groups as the rising tide started washing over the dead and wounded. After the final naval charge was repulsed, the remnants of the naval brigade not trapped against the palisade regrouped and joined Dawson's Marines manning the defensive works covering the Army's rear. As Terry intended, this allowed fresh Army in-

fantry regiments to redeploy, reinforcing the foothold inside Fort Fisher. By midnight, Fort Fisher capitulated, with all the defenders killed, wounded, or captured; both enemy leaders, Whiting and Lamb, were seriously wounded and captured. Terry, in his official report, stated, "The assault of the sailors and marines, although it failed, undoubtedly contributed somewhat to our success."<sup>54</sup> Navy officers and even the defenders agreed. One of the Navy division commanders of the naval brigade placed no blame for the assault's failure on the Marines, saying they were too few and too far away in the open without cover attempting to support the sailors' charge. The Marine battalion's losses at Fort Fisher included 15 killed, 46 wounded in the assault, and another 3 killed and 5 wounded in the subsequent negligent explosion of the magazine after occupying the fort.<sup>55</sup>

Following a distinct pattern the failures were attributable to "lack of proper organization . . . throwing so many small squads . . . from the different vessels together in one mass, lacking proper company formations . . . unacquainted with each other . . . led to the confusion exhibited . . . not due to any want of personal valor on the part of the officers or men."<sup>56</sup> The naval brigade's poor organization, lack of specific training, and inexperienced leadership along with improper armaments at Fort Fisher encapsulate the overall causes explaining the battlefield performance ashore of the Marine Corps.

## Manning the Corps *Leadership*

When the war broke out, tensions were high in the Marine Corps, reflecting the U.S. military and nation as a whole. Between the first Marine officer to resign in February 1861 to the last one to do so in January 1862, a total of 20 officers of the 63 prewar officers either resigned or were dismissed and served in the Confederate States of America's military. Some as-

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 165.

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 166–67, 177.

<sup>52</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 583–84.

<sup>53</sup> Lamb, "The Defense of Fort Fisher," 650.

<sup>54</sup> *The War of the Rebellion*, series 1, vol. 46, part 1, 400 and series 1, vol. 46, part 2, 140, 155–56.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson, *Hurricane of Fire*, 186; Selfridge, "The Navy at Fort Fisher," 660; and Sullivan, *The Final Year*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 11, 447.

sert that this loss of experienced leadership resulted in the poor performance of the Corps during the war. In comparison, nearly 25 percent of the serving West Point officers resigned to serve the secessionist states in 1861, with 30 percent from the 1830–61 classes fighting for the rebel armies, while 37 percent of the 1861 class of cadets withdrew to serve the Confederacy. Few enlisted Marines defected or quit to join the secessionists. The most significant portion of the losses came from the junior officer ranks, while senior officers mostly remained loyal to the Union. By 1864, the Corps' strength was 64 officers and 3,075 enlisted; compared to the other services, it had not grown during wartime.<sup>57</sup>

Marine officers' quality was a prominent focus. Colonel Harris, Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1862, proposed future Marine officers come from appointments at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to provide a solid education and tactical training background, but was not approved. In 1862, a bill was proposed to Congress for future appointments of Marine officers to come from the Naval Academy, but it too was denied and it would be decades before Marine officers commissioned through the academy.<sup>58</sup>

In a letter to a Navy clerk applying for a Marine officer's commission, Harris was direct to the point of politicization of commissioning: "But I would remind you, success depends entirely on the amount of political influence brought to bear." Even in 1864, when the political appointee system was less prominent than earlier in the conflict, it was still a measure of influence, as indicated in a letter from then-Commandant Colonel Zeilin to a mother: "I would advise you to obtain the aid of some political friend, it being, in fact, the only influence which can affect the object desired."<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Marine Corps officers had to be between the ages of 20 and 25 at the time of their commissioning, which arbitrarily limited many prior-service candidates. The class of

1861, entering commissioned service that fall, were of mixed experience. Of the 30 new lieutenants, 12 had some prior experience, either in the Army or as enlisted Marines, or military instruction at the Naval Academy before dropping out. There was improvement, however, with the class of 1862 having only 2 of 12 new lieutenants devoid of any military experience. Most Marine officers with prior experience were enlisted Army, a few NCOs, and the occasional rarity of an Army officer transferred to the Corps. Limited battlefield experience as a private was better than none but more would be needed for a battlefield leader; however, it provided enough discipline and routine military knowledge for leading small Marine detachments shipboard.<sup>60</sup>

In a letter offering his services as a lieutenant, Army private Edward Taylor summed up the Marine commissioning process, writing,

I asked if any effort could be made by you at home to procure for me a commission either in the Marines or in the U.S. Army. I spoke particularly of the Marines as I thought a position easier secured there than in the Infantry. . . . Naval officers, as well as Army officers, are mostly chosen from the schools at West Point and the Naval School, while the officers of Marines are more often taken from civil life. . . . A Marine is not expected to be a sailor—he is merely a soldier on shipboard. As a soldier, I have the education and drill necessary . . . but as an officer of the Marine Corps, I should do as well as the next. . . . It needs but a few or even one influential man to represent the fitness of the applicant to the Secretary and the appointment will be made.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ralph W. Donnelly, *The Confederate States Marine Corps: The Rebel Leathernecks* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1989), 170, 174; and Sullivan, *The First Year*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 130, 149, 151.

<sup>59</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 158.

<sup>60</sup> Sullivan, *The First Year*, 164, 170–71; and Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 137–38, 141.

<sup>61</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 144–45.

This highlighted that it was largely political, with the ideal not the certainty, that new lieutenants had any military education or experience. Taylor's other correspondence with his sister also hit on a reason many Army soldiers sought service in the Marines. "The number we lose in one battle would man a large navy."<sup>62</sup> Service at sea had the allure of relative safety compared to combat service ashore.

As for manning the rank-and-file, the Corps struggled overall with recruiting throughout the war. The strictness of the recruitment standards coupled with the lack of monetary incentive through bonuses undermined the Corps' ability to meet required quotas to fill ship requirements, staff Marine barracks and naval yard security detachments, provide instructors, and man permanent Marine battalions. Enlisted candidates had to pass a medical exam, be single or with a signed waiver by a spouse, and be between 21 and 35 years old. Those 18–20 could join if they had a signed waiver from a parent or guardian. Marines had to be taller than 5 foot 5 inches, though later dropped in 1862 to 5 foot 4 inches. Citizenship was required; immigrants were only accepted once they completed the naturalization process without assistance. Over time, the Corps adjusted, and in 1862 worked through immigration judges to provide naturalization free of charge to enlistees. By the last year of the war, the Corps obtained authorization to pay bonuses to recruits, thereby allowing it to monetarily compete with the bonuses available from the other Services. Aside from initial recruitment, another key aspect to maintain experience in the wartime ranks is measured by reenlistments. The Corps' record of reenlistments was poor. For example, early in the war—fever of 1861, it held only a 36-percent reenlistment rate, posing a challenge for staffing an experienced Corps.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 144–45.

<sup>63</sup> Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 131–32, 154; and Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 160. See also Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 153–56; and Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 156–76 for detailed coverage on the recruitment bonus (then called *bounties*) ordeal.

## Training

An obvious contributing factor to performance in combat is the degree of training received. Marines were ill-prepared for the complexities of land-based tactics in formation at larger echelons. However, this was not for lack of effort and certainly did not reflect the confidence and spirit of the average Marine, even if their own officers, typically those most experienced in shore combat, expressed reservations, such as prior to the Fort Sumter raid.

A Marine at Washington Barracks who participated at Bull Run wrote to his parents prior to the fight, "We will be drilled better in one Month here than the Volunteers would be in six Months."<sup>64</sup> The Navy created a provisional Marine battalion for amphibious operations in fall 1861, however, it was never used and was shortly disestablished, with the Marines returning to traditional duty. The other provisional battalion trained but was not used for the major land assault on Battery Wagner but was employed poorly on the amphibious Fort Sumter assault. This unfortunately limits solid analysis of provisional Marine battalion performance ashore in comparison to ad hoc Marine battalions, the far more common fighting Marines employed ashore. A common fear of the special amphibious battalion concept among senior Marines was its use leading to Marines being absorbed into the Army and losing their separate and naval identity, although this fear did not preclude Marines from participating regularly ashore in many small and some larger engagements, as detailed previously. New recruits recorded drills "at all hours of the day" and that they had rigorous training, although it was dominated by individual and crew drills, not collective training of larger formations. Their drills included many land-based activities, among them artillery and light infantry, as well as traditional ship battery drills.<sup>65</sup> A Marine Corps history noted, "While the Army drilled, marched, and countermarched . . . some 200 Marines were assigned to the Potomac Flotilla to scour the Maryland countryside . . . in search of Confederate

<sup>64</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The First Year*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> Henig, "Marines Fighting Marines"; and Sullivan, *The Second Year*, 210.

arms.<sup>66</sup> These sorts of activities, however, did not prepare them for large maneuvers ashore, although it did provide experiences and contributions to the war effort even if at the expense of more time training for larger land engagements.

Major Reynolds trained and drilled a select Marine detachment, creating a specifically organized amphibious battalion to serve with Admiral Samuel Dupont's flotilla. Unfortunately, this special drilled amphibious force was never used for anything more than garrison duty of abandoned coastal forts, such as St. Augustine, Florida. On 25 March, Dupont released Reynolds and his amphibious battalion back to normal Marine duty across the fleet.<sup>67</sup> Much as a pattern can be seen in attribution to poor organization, training, leadership, and proper equipping, so it was in repeated experiments in forming organized amphibious battalion-size elements organized, trained, and designed for land operations never used and disbanded for the needs of the fleet.

Zeilin, one of the most experienced Marine officers in combat ashore, formed one of the provisional, semipermanently organized battalions at Marine Barracks Brooklyn comprising 12 officers, 13 sergeants, 12 corporals, 6 musicians, and 233 privates from across the various Marine barracks, stations, and naval ships. It departed New York on 13 July 1864. This composite Marine battalion drilled on Morris Island, South Carolina, for an assault on Battery Wagner but was never employed against those enemy fortifications.<sup>68</sup> Zeilin requested relief from the command in a message to Rear Admiral John Dahlgren, asserting the Marines assembled were unable to accomplish the task of storming the enemy fortifications and noting, "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." Certainly reflecting on his own experiences in previous land combat, notably at Bull Run, he continued, "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." He pointed out,

Many of these men are raw recruits . . . every garrison, receiving (ship), and even seagoing ships at the North, has been stripped to get these few together; and until they are exercised for some time under their present officers . . . it would be very dangerous to attempt any hazardous operations requiring coolness and promptness . . . and no duty which 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 . . . they would doubtless fall into great confusion despite the best efforts of their officers.<sup>69</sup>

He elaborated on the difficulty of drilling in the heat on a narrow beach during the day and of darkness at night precluding training for company and larger formations.<sup>70</sup>

While it is true that nearly 78 percent of the Marines available to Zeilin for the Charleston operations had previous service, service does not equate to combat experience, especially the sort needed. While this may have been true of the enlisted, 10 of the 14 Marine officers had direct combat experience either in the Mexican-American War, earlier in the Civil War, or both, such as Zeilin. Dahlgren, his faith in the Marine battalion shaken, wrote in his diary, "The Commander of Marines reports against risking his men in attacking works. Two of his officers had done the same in conversation. I said it must come from the Senior in writing. Rather hurtful. What are Marines for?"<sup>71</sup> Dahlgren removed the Marines from any plans to storm Wagner and used them for security and guard duties. The following attempted assault on Fort Sumter painfully vindicated these concerns. The Marine battalion assembled on Morris Island had been the

<sup>66</sup> Nalty, *United States Marines at Harpers Ferry*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Nalty, *United States Marines at Harpers Ferry*, 11, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 46, 53–54.

<sup>69</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 14, 439.

<sup>70</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 14, 439.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 57.

largest gathering of Marines in one formation since the Mexican-American War.<sup>72</sup>

Oddly, a consistent desire for Navy squadrons along the coast was to possess a Marine battalion-size formation, but they rarely maintained these provisional, semipermanent battalions with any continuity, supported them adequately, or employed them correctly, if at all. In a hybrid manner, Captain Edward Reynolds managed a composite Marine battalion in the aftermath of the Fort Sumter debacle with the Marines remaining in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron under Admiral Dahlgren. It was neither a semipermanent provisional battalion detached from ship duty organized for duty ashore nor was it a temporary, ad hoc immediate operation formation. Reynolds continually worked to acclimate this Marine battalion in Port Royal, South Carolina, gathering the Marines together to conduct drills twice a day. The reputation of this composite Marine battalion grew.<sup>73</sup>

Dahlgren's composite fleet brigade of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron drilled for a day and a half before embarking on the Honey Hill expedition, one of the most successful (relatively) Marine forays into land combat during the war. It comprised two battalions of sailors and one of Marines, led by the only Marine officer of the fleet, a Second Lieutenant George G. Stoddard with less than two years in the Corps. The other officer vacancies in the Marine battalion were filled by naval ensigns designated acting Marine officers and Marine NCOs filling the company leadership.<sup>74</sup> Dahlgren commented after observing their training, "The officers are clever and the men zealous . . . it is very difficult to get the officers into the idea of light drill and open order. They will mass the men."<sup>75</sup> Stoddard wrote, "Although sergeants make good acting officers, still, in action, they do not feel the responsibility; neither do they have that moral effect on the men that a commissioned officer does. . . . Please allow me to call your attention to the fact that

with 200 Marines in this squadron there is but one officer."<sup>76</sup>

As the war progressed, this exemplified how—even without an organized, cohesive doctrine—differently minded officers grasped the importance and opportunity of preparation for large-scale land operations and struggled to prepare ad hoc Marine battalions for success in them. Without this, Marine battalions courted disaster on land, as shown by the naval brigade at Fort Fisher, having never drilled together prior to the assault.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

By the end of the war, the Corps included 3,900 Marines, equating to roughly 7 percent of the Navy, which was actually a drop from the prewar numbers of 20 percent, since the U.S. Navy grew during the war while the Corps remained virtually stagnant in size. Marine Corps losses in the war on ship and land totaled 102 killed in action, 233 accidental or disease, 175 wounded, and 266 captured, paling in comparison to the casualties of the Army. Notably, 16 of 24 of the initial postwar brevets (rewards for wartime service for officers) awarded were conveyed on Marines for land-based operations.<sup>78</sup>

Based on these examinations, it becomes clear that the Marines performed poorly when led by naval officers and in an independent manner as compared to a combined Army-Navy force. When Marine battalions were integrated into Army lines of battle, their performance equaled that of the U.S. infantry, with the exception of First Bull Run, which was a poor performance by all, with even the Army infantry and leadership as inept and inexperienced as the Marines. At the second Fort Fisher assault, the Marines—once employed with the Army—also positively contributed to the victory. Indisputably, with each circumstance, individual Marines and their officers displayed courage, bravery, and dedication, fighting vigorously

<sup>72</sup> Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> Sullivan, *The Third Year*, 221.

<sup>74</sup> Sullivan, *The Final Year*, 74, 76, 78–79.

<sup>75</sup> As quoted in Sullivan, *The Final Year*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> ORN, series 1, vol. 16, 102.

<sup>77</sup> Selfridge, "The Navy at Fort Fisher," 659.

<sup>78</sup> Donnelly, *The Confederate States Marine Corps*, 4–5; and Sullivan, *The Final Year*, 238, 249–50.



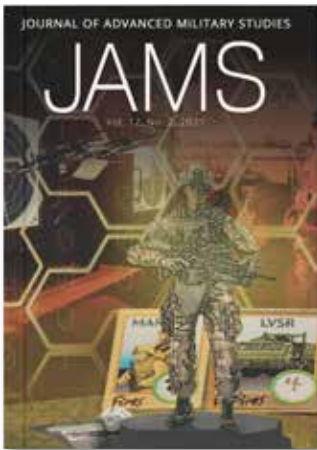
and noteworthy regardless of ad hoc organization, ineffective training, poor leadership, or planning.

Awareness of Navy priorities allows better alignment of Service priorities and understanding of limitations on force adaptation and importance of manpower management. This explains how the traditional manning of the fleet impacted the secondary priority of Marine battalions for operations ashore, forcing ad hoc organizations. A backward approach

to talent management and the accessions process hindered innovation and adaptation, as seen in the struggles with Marine officer quality. Shipboard security and punitive small raids as priority employment directly influenced training focus on individual and crew drills to the neglect of complicated, collective training with telling effects on Marine performance in large-scale combat ashore.

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## Call for Submissions



**Fall 2022, Conflict on the Seas.** This issue will address great-power competition on the world's oceans, not limited to the North Atlantic, Arctic Ocean, the South China Sea, and other contested littoral and oceanic gray zone conflicts. How can the United States and its allies remain competitive in what is becoming an increasingly contested environment? Deadline 31 May 2022.

**Spring 2023, The Next Generation of Warfare.** This issue will address elements discussed in *Force Design 2030*, such as how the United States, in conjunction with its partners and allies, can remain competitive in gray zone conflicts while still maintaining capabilities to counter state and nonstate actors that use hybrid and irregular warfare approaches around the world. Deadline 1 January 2023.

Email submissions or article proposals to [mcu\\_press@usmcu.edu](mailto:mcu_press@usmcu.edu).

**Calling all military historians:** Are you doing new and unique research into the Marine Corps' history? Do you want your work published in a subject-targeted, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal? Then submit your articles to *Marine Corps History* journal! Junior faculty and advanced graduate students are encouraged to submit.

The editors are currently accepting article and book review submissions for the Summer 2022 and Winter 2022 issues. Deadlines are:

- 31 January 2022 (Summer 2022 issue)
- 1 June 2022 (Winter 2022 issue)

For submission requirements, contact the managing editor: [stephani.miller@usmcu.edu](mailto:stephani.miller@usmcu.edu). Current and past issues may be downloaded at

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