

Civil War Letter Found in Arlington

(Written January 16, 1865, aboard the U.S.S. "Wabash" by Assistant Engineer, John T. Smith, U.S.N., aged 19 and 4 months, to his Mother.)¹

U.S.S. "Wabash"
Off Willmington N. C.
Jan. 16th 1865

My dear Mother,

The Army and Navy sailed from Beaufort Harbor, for Willmington on the 12th Inst., where they arrived at 9 oclock the same night, it then being too late to commence operation, it was deemed advisable to come to and anchor, and await the coming morning. Early on Friday morning (the 13th Inst.) the Ironsides, and four Monitor's steamed within range of fort Fisher, and opened a terrific cross-fire on the fort, the garrison of which was completely surprised, as they never expected to see us again. In the meantime the Frigates Wabash, Minnesota, Colorado, Susquehanah and Powhattan came to anchor in line of battle, directly opposite the Halfmoon battery, and with their nine inch guns, covered the landing of the troops, who numbered ten thousand men under command of Genl. Terry, instead of the craven hearted Butler. By three oclock the troops were all landed in safety, a line of skirmishers was thrown out in the woods, to feel the enemy's position, the Rail Roads between Willmington and "Fisher", was torn up, the Telegraph wire cut, and fifty prisoners, and one hundred head of cattle captured in the short space of one hour. At 3.45, the Admiral made a signal to the Frigates to get under weigh, and engage Fort Fisher, leaving the smaller gun boats to cover the troops in case of an attack by the enemy. At four Oclock we (the Wabash) fired our first shot at Fort Fisher, which struck the Fort, throwing tons of sand high in the air. In a few moments, after the Frigate got in position nothing was to be seen of the Fort, the smoke and sand mingling together, completely obscuring it from sight. (Just imagine, the effect of three hundred shell exploding in a fort (per minute). At six oclock, it then being dark, the wooden vessels hauled off, but not so with the Iron Clads, for they kept their position all night, throwing in their fifteen inch shells every ten minutes. I dont know what effect our night firing had on the fort, the intention was, to prevent the rebels from sleeping off the fatigues of the day, thereby unfitting them for the next day, but I have been told by prisoners, that they slept in perfect safety in their bombproofs, and that their sleep was as quiet

¹The original of this letter is in the possession of Mrs. H. P. Simpson, Member of the Society and daughter of the writer.

and peaceful as though nothing was going on. The only damage we sustained, was the carrying away of our jib boom, and our sails cut slightly. The Collorado, had six men killed and four wounded, the other vessels was wounded more or less, but of the casualties, I have not as yet learned. On Saturday (14th Inst.) morning, the bombardment was renewed by the Iron Clads-- assisted by the 2nd. Class sloops of war, and the smaller gun boats. The large Frigates was not in the action of to-day, on account of it being rough. At three oclock this afternoon, the Admiral made signal to the fleet, that he had been on shore to see Genl. Terry, and that arrangements was made to storm the fort on Sunday afternoon at three oclock and asking for volunteers from the different vessels, to aid the soldiers. The Sailors were immediately mustered on the quarter deck, and the Admiral's signals made known to them, the result was, twelve hundred Sailors, and four hundred Marines, volunteered to assist in storming the Fort, (the Wabash, sending 180 men). At six oclock the wooden vessels hauled off, leaving the Iron Clads to continue the bombardment during the night.

Sunday morning January 15th, the third day of the bombardment--dawned with a bright sky, and every heart beat high that it was to witness the crowning success of the expedition. The plan of battle was as follows: The Sailors and Marines, numbering sixteen hundred men, commanded by Navy Officer, was selected to storm the Fort in front, so as attract the enemy's attention as much as possible, while the Army, charged from the woods and attacked the rebels in the rear. The fleet in the mean, to keep up a vigorous fire on the Fort, until the assaulting party was within a few yards of the fort, when the firing was to cease. How well it was carried out, we will see as we proceed. At six a. m. oclock, all the fleet, consisting of four Monitors, five of the largest Frigates in the Navy, and fourty smaller vessels and gunboats, (making in all fourty nine vessels, carrying an aggregate of eleven hundred guns) steamed in toward the Fort. At 8 oclock a.m. the vessels being in position, the bombardment of the previous days, was commenced in earnest, gradually attaining a degree of unusual splendor far exceeding the fierceness of the previous days, the firing from the fleet was served with a unity of purpose, the shells enfilading the traverses and batteries beyond, dismounting five guns on the longer face of the Fort. In the meantime the small boats containing the Sailors and Marines had congregated around the Flag Ship, when upon orders they moved in shore, their progress presented a most picturesque sight, the boats of the different vessels contending to land first. The landing was effected by noon, within a mile of

the fort; the storming party was immediately organized, the Sailors in three columns, supported by the Marines, who were disposed in two columns, protecting the flank and rear. At fourty five minutes past two, the Sailor's were observed advancing up the beach double quick heedless of the grape and canister, that whistled around them, until within a few hundred yards of the fort,--the surface of which was the objective point of the movement. Here they reformed line under cover of some rifle pits, when final advance was made. Only a few yards intervened, but many a gallant fellow moistened the sand with his blood ere the distance was travelled. As the men were advancing upon the fort, a signal was made by the Admiral, "Cease firing", when all at once, the roaring of cannon was suddenly hushed, and every eye in the fleet was turned on the advancing columns of the Sailors and Soldiers, and many were the silent prayers offered up to God for their success. The firing had ceased on our part, but not so with the rebels; they poured in volley after volley of canister, into our lines, strewing the beach with dead and dying. But our Sailors never faltered, but kept on until they reached the palisades, when they divided in two portions, one going around the palisades, the other through an apperture, which had been blown out by one of our shells. The firing had suddenly ceased by the rebels, not a man was to be seen on the fort, the moment we thought the Fort ours, the earth suddenly opened, and closed again leaving the parrapet of the fort lined with human beings,

It seemed as though the mother earth,
Had given up her warlike birth.

conspicuous among them was the Rebel Colonel Lamb, who waved a sword above his head, calling to our men, Come on Yank: here is the place to get the worth of your money! Three times did our Sailors rally, and three times were they driven back, until at last being no longer able to sustain the rebel fire, they retreated. It was a repluse, but our bluejackets fully proved their valor, even in defeat. The retreat was made under a galling fire from the enemy, who elated with their temporary success poured in volley after volley of musketry, while as the men came within range of the artillery showers of grape came whistling after them. Every one gave the day up for lost, when a faint cheer was heard, and all eyes were turned in the direction from whence it came; and the Stars and Stripes was discovered waving trimphant on the first mound, the rapid crack and flashes of musketry telling too plainly, the desperate strife raging in that quarter. Our troops had been successful, but at a terrible cost of life. Mound after mound was taken, until the 8th mound was

arrived at, when the fight commenced in earnest, fighting hand to hand, the rebels disputing every inch of ground. Charge, after charge was made by our troops, but all to no avail. The troops on both sides fought with a desperation never equaled, the battle raged to such a height, and so close were the contending parties, that knife's and clubbed muskets were used freely. After four hours hard fighting (from three o'clock until seven) the rebels were driven to their bombproofs where they made a stand, fighting with a desperation beyond description. Charge and re-charge was made but not one inch would they yield.

At 9 o'clock, Genl. Terry sent in a fresh brigade, which ended the contest, the rebels were driven from their bombproofs to the area of the fort where they made a slight resistance, and at ten o'clock, the fort and sixteen hundred prisoners was surrendered to Major Genl. Terry, by Colonel Lamb. "Fort Fisher is Ours"! What a joyful announcement; cheer after cheer was given by the Navy, and as the sound died away, it seemed to echo "Victory". The rockets seemed to shoot higher and sparkle more brilliant than usual. The Steam Whistles, (the sound of which is all ways disagreeable to my ears) they too seemed to discourse a sweet melody.

The fort, after the fight presented a scene most terrible to behold. If Hell is what it is said to be, then the Interior of Fort Fisher is a fair comparison. Here and there you see great heaps of human beings, laying just as they fell, one upon the other, some groaning piteously, and asking for water. Others whose mortal career is over, still grasping the weapon that they used to so good an effect in life. A little further on you come to the 8th mound; what a terrible scene of bloodshed and carnage is presented to one's sight. There, a gloomy hideous Saturalania reigns; there in that one spot lays eight hundred mortal souls, one upon the other, just as they fell, Confederates and Federals, all together. Still further on you come to the mouths of the bombproofs, there a scene presents itself that would make the stoutest heart quail and tremble with terror, here also gives fresh proofs of the desperate struggle, here lays five hundred Federals and Confederates, piled one upon the other, but how heart rendering, to hear the piteous appeals for water; and you not able to comply. But the most remarkable feature amidst this scene of strife was that every ten rebels out of fifteen was shot either through the mouth, or head, a few of our men was shot through the head, but very few compared with that of the rebels. In the area of the fort you will see some our men sitting around the camp fires, cooking and eating their bread, their hands still covered with blood and gore, others with the brains of humane

beings, besmeared over their clothes, and faces, eating and drinking as though, nothing had happened. On the breach of one of the guns of the fort, can be plainly seen the brains of some poor being, the priming wire laying just over the vent hole. It is surmised, that the man was in the act of firing the gun when one of our shells struck him. The gun, by the way, was an 8 inch Columbiad, loaded to the muzzle, with canister; luckily for our men, that it was not fired.

Well mother, Fort Fisher is ours, after a terrible bombardment of five days, and five nights, during which time (50,000) fifty thousand shell, was fired from the fleet, the majority of which exploded in the Fort. It is one of the most formidable artificial forts in the world, and I wonder, how it was ever taken. But it is ours, the price we paid in blood.

We lost nine hundred men, in the Army, and three hundred in the Navy, making a grand total of 1200 men. The rebel loss, was, 500 killed and wounded, and sixteen hundred prisoners, making a total of 2100 men.

The rebels deserve credit for the manner in which they defended the Fort, they had only three thousand men in the fort, while we had ten thousand. It is my impression, that if Genl. Terry had had any other troops, but those, that he did have, that we would have been whipped. Just think of it, three thousand men, sustaining an assault, for seven hours, against ten thousand men in the front, and a fleet of gun boats in the rear.

Well thank God, I escaped the fight, and may I never be a witness another like [it]. I got a Prussian Rifle from the fort, and a few other relics, which I intend to bring home.

You must excuse this badly written letter, for I am in a hurry to get it ready for the mail. You will find a few mistakes in the spelling, but I have not time to correct them.

Kiss all the children for me, and give my love to Jennie.

Good bye
From your
Affect Son until Death
John T. Smith
Asst. Engineer, U.S.N.
U.S. Ship "Wabash"
Hampton Roads
Va.

Write soon