

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,
BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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THE MARINE ARTILLERY
WITH THE
BURNSIDE EXPEDITION
AND THE
BATTLE OF CAMDEN, N C.

BY WILLIAM B. AVERY,

[LATE CAPTAIN FIRST REGIMENT MARINE ARTILLERY, NEW YORK VOLUNTEERS.]



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THE MARINE ARTILLERY
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BURNSIDE EXPEDITION.

[READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY, APRIL 16, 1879.]

THE Burnside Expedition left Annapolis, Maryland, on the eighth day of January, 1862, and on the eighth of February the island of Roanoke was captured, after a desperate fight, and the whole north was electrified by the news of one of the first real successes to the union forces. Every one connected with that expedition and conversant with the subsequent events in eastern North Carolina will remember the Marine Artillery. The writer, who had gone out in command of one of the boats of the fleet, which was intended to be used as a floating battery, was invited to join the regiment about that time ;

and so it happened that a Rhode Island boy became a member of a New York regiment, and attained some prominence in that department as an officer of the famous "Horse Marines," as we were generally called by the rest of the troops.

To that regiment belonged many of the men by whom the government transports were manned, and some of them were present and took active part in nearly every skirmish, engagement or expedition that took place from the time we reached Hatteras Inlet till our final disbandment in March, 1863. The first detachment, especially, was made up of brave and hardy men; and as a sailor never thinks of flight in time of danger, so these men, being nearly all seamen, stood manfully to their duty. Distributed among the different vessels of the fleet at the time we left New York, and under the command of men not their own officers, they endured the hardships of a sailor's life, in that stormy season and on a perilous coast, without a murmur. At Roanoke and New Berne, some of them landed with their guns under command of Captain Dayton, of the schooner Highlander, and fought as bravely as did

the rest of the troops. As boatmen in landing the soldiers, they were invaluable.

I shall proceed to mention some of the chief characteristics of the corps, and then give a brief narrative of one of the many fights in which we took part, as a sample of our mode of operating with the army, hoping that I may thus be able to entertain you for a brief period, and also add my mite to the history of our great struggle for freedom, my part in which I always look back upon with feelings of satisfaction and pleasure.

The regiment was organized in New York by its colonel, William A. Howard, than whom a braver and truer officer never lived. Early in life he had been a midshipman in the navy, but the war found him senior captain in the United States Revenue Marine, which position he temporarily left to form this new branch of the service. The idea itself originated with him, and to his energy and zeal can be attributed much of the success of the undertaking. Similar organizations were afterwards formed in other departments and proved very effective,—notably, the “Naval Brigade,” on the Mississippi river, and Gra-

ham's "Army Gunboats," on the James river. Belonging to the army, and under the direct control of the commanding general, expeditions by water could be undertaken without the aid of the naval forces, which were not always at hand when needed. After nearly two years of good and efficient service, and during the absence of the colonel on account of sickness, certain troubles arose in the regiment which finally led to our being mustered out by order of the Secretary of War, though it was believed at the time that had Colonel Howard been present such would not have been the case. As it was, the members mostly all entered other branches of the service—one or two other officers and myself entering the navy, where we received good appointments, and the department seemed glad to avail itself of our services.

Rev. Mr. Woodbury, in his excellent book, "Burnside and the Ninth Army Corps," in one place speaks of the Marine Artillery as "an amphibious kind of force of a few hundred men;" and that phrase is very expressive of the real nature of our duties, as we were at all times ready for service either on land

or water, and many of us were frequently under water even, in the course of our varied experience. During our passage from Fortress Monroe to Hatteras, the Grenade had her rudder disabled, and but for my exertions in getting her repaired, would have been left at the inlet when the fleet moved up to take Roanoke. In order to get her ready in time to receive the company of Zouaves that went up on her, I had to work two hours up to my neck in the cold water, and part of the time had to be under water entirely. But most anything was preferable to being left by the expedition, so eager were we all to be present at the attack on the island.

The uniform of the regiment was nearly like that of the navy. The officers wore a gold band on the cap, but no sash under the sword belt. The shoulder strap was red, with a cross cannon and anchor wrought in silver, afterwards adopted by the general as the emblem of the Ninth Corps. The line officers wore double-breasted coats, and the clothes of the men were all of dark navy blue. The arms were short Belgian rifles with the sword bayonet for those who acted as infantry, and pistols and cutlasses for

those who worked the howitzers, which latter were of the naval pattern and used either in launches on the slide, or on shore mounted on a carriage with trail-wheel and drag-rope. We were especially well drilled in the use of naval light artillery, either afloat or ashore.

The gunboats, on which about half of the regiment was quartered, and by whom several of them were manned, had good batteries of thirty-pounder Parrotts and thirty-two-pounder smooth bores, in the exercise of which we were also proficient. We were like the navy in drill and discipline, and were in reality army gunboats. Indeed, during a portion of the time in the fall and winter of 1862, at which time I was in command of the Lancer, mounting six large guns and two twelve-pounder Wiard steel howitzers, having on board my whole company, we acted directly with the navy, being ordered to report for duty to Lieutenant Commander Flusser, with whom we served on several different expeditions, and by whom I was treated with the utmost courtesy and respect.

We lay one week up the Roanoke river, above

Plymouth, taking our regular turn at picket duty, waiting for the rebel ram to come down, the existence of which we knew at that early date. It did not succeed in getting down that year, however, but the next year it did come down, and the havoc made by the ram Albemarle is familiar to us all. The brave and chivalrous Flusser lost his life, and the ram remained triumphant at Plymouth till destroyed by the daring Cushing, who was one of Flusser's officers at the time we served together the year before.

Four large sounds and a great number of rivers flowing into them from the eastern part of North Carolina, gave us plenty of opportunities for expeditions by water; and as we had a sort of roving commission, we were enabled to be doing something all the time. Aside from our operations with the army in general, we undertook expeditions by ourselves, at which times we would often penetrate inland from fifteen to thirty miles before returning to our boats, in which we had gone as far as possible up one of the rivers. With headquarters at Roanoke Island, the colonel would direct our movements as informa-

tion arrived from the surrounding country, or orders were sent up from department headquarters at New Berne. In operating with the army, our most effective weapon was the howitzer, we acting as a field battery; but when making strikes by ourselves, often at some of the guerrillas, we generally went light, with only rifles or pistols. Sometimes making forced loans of horses we rode, or if at night, and the distance to be covered was short, we went on foot, and generally returned to our boat without making any halt at all. When once on board, however, we had comfortable quarters and plenty of opportunities for needed rest and refreshment, for which reason the health of the men was generally good.

The writer on one occasion landed sixty men from the Lancer at Shilo, on the Pasquotank river, just after dark, marched all of them twenty miles, and a portion of them thirty miles, inland toward Richmond, recaptured several union prisoners on their way to "Libby," dispersed the gang of guerrillas who had them in charge, recovered a large quantity of ordnance they had stolen, and returned to the

ship the next night without the loss of a man or gun. I need scarcely mention that to get over so much distance, I had mounted myself on a good horse, "borrowed from a neighbor," and that the twenty men who went with me the last ten miles were mounted in five of the two-wheeled carts of the country and drawn by horses, all of which had been appropriated quite unceremoniously for the occasion, but of course were afterwards returned to their owners. In justice to some of the residents, I will say, however, that many of them were good loyal people, ready with information, and seemed to be willing for us to use their stock with which to chase the guerrillas. My taking the horses without their consent was in reality a kindness to them, as they would not then be obliged to incur the hatred of their neighbors by seeming too willing to help us.

The narrative which I now give was written only a few days after the events therein recorded, and was intended only for home use; but as I found it among my war letters, I will give it substantially as then written. It is therefore rather personal in its character, and if I dwell somewhat largely on my

own doings, I trust that I may be pardoned in that regard.

Reports having been received that two or three iron gunboats were building at Norfolk to come down here and destroy our shipping in the sounds, and that supplies of corn were being conveyed up through the Dismal Swamp canal, an expedition was set on foot for the purpose of destroying the lock at the lower end of the canal, and of cutting off and capturing any body of troops stationed south of that point. The fight of which I am about to speak, took place some two miles from the lock, in Camden county, North Carolina, and not far from River Bridge. Our force consisted of five regiments of infantry and two detachments of the Marine Artillery, with two twelve-pounder boat howitzers, and two other howitzers belonging to the Zouaves. Colonel Howard had general command of this artillery force of some fifty men, but it was under the immediate command of Lieutenant George Gerrard and myself, who landed from the Virginia, of which we were at that time officers. General Reno was in command of the expedition, and had come up from New Berne

with two regiments of infantry, the Twenty-first Massachusetts and the Fifty-first Pennsylvania, on the transports Cossack and Northerner. The other three regiments came from Roanoke, and were the Ninth and Eighty-ninth New York, and the Sixth New Hampshire.

We left Roanoke Island on the eighteenth of April, 1862, and came to anchor just below Elizabeth City about nine o'clock in the evening. We, with the Virginia, towed up the schooner Edward Slade, having on board Messrs. Mallifeurt and Hayden, submarine engineers, with apparatus and powder for destroying the lock and bridge. A landing was immediately begun, and by midnight all of the troops from Roanoke — three regiments and the Marines — were on shore and ready to march. The transports from New Berne being aground, Colonel Howard went down with the Virginia to their assistance, and remained with them till all the troops were landed. About two in the morning of the nineteenth, Colonel Hawkins received orders to move on with the force already landed, and we fell into line in rear of his regiment, which was the advance of the column.

Rebel pickets were soon routed, but being mounted they escaped to give information of our approach.

Our march had now begun in earnest; and such a march. Deliver me from another like it. As afterwards ascertained, we took the wrong road, and instead of fourteen miles on a good road, as the general and his two regiments had, we went thirty-two miles, and on a very bad road. On our first landing I sent Mr. Hand, clerk of the Virginia, who had been out in the first three months troops from Philadelphia, and who went along as a volunteer, to procure horses from some farmer near there. He succeeded in finding one for each piece, to which we soon had them harnessed. We had to depend mainly on the drag-ropes, however, at which the men constantly relieved each other. Our road at first lay across several fields, ploughed and ditched; the ditches we were compelled to fill with rails in order to get our guns across them. The horses would break away from the piece, and the men were obliged to work hard in the soft ground till we at length reached the road. It was hard marching even for the infantry, but for us with

the guns, and in the darkness of night, it was terrible, and we all had to strain every nerve to get through. On reaching the road it was not quite so bad, but still bad enough.

About daylight my horse began to give out, and I went in search of another. Coming to a large farmhouse near the road, I accosted the planter, who was walking his front porch, and demanded of him a horse. He replied that he had only plough-stock, and pointed to a fine pair of mules which one of his negroes was just hitching to a plough to begin his day's work. I told him they were just what I wanted, and ordered the man to follow me with the mules and harness, which he very cheerfully did. With these and a spare horse for the other piece, we got along better. The harnesses being rather old, were constantly giving out, at which times we kept our place in line by dragging the guns wholly by hand, and hitching on the animals while marching; otherwise the infantry would crowd past us and we lose our place in line. They seemed rather inclined to think us of little account anyway, and that we might as well be left behind; but they

afterwards thought better of us, and were glad to have us in their rear on the return. The negro boy, Enoch, was indispensable with the mules. They seemed to have a great abhorrence for strangers, and would often make it manifest by a free use of their heels in a manner particularly obnoxious to the sailors. Had Enoch been asked to "clew up a royal and furl it," probably he would have known as much about it as the sailors did of harnessing the mules and making them work. He was also of assistance in caring for the mules while we were engaged in the fight, and brought them up as soon as it was over. Some three or four miles further on we overtook a negro with a load of wood, whose cart we took to convey our ammunition, rations, and the pea-jackets, which the men were by this time beginning to throw away. We made him up a good load, and relieved the guns of much weight, thus making them easier to handle. He also was very willing to go with us, and even seemed pleased at the idea.

With an occasional rest, we marched along through a fine, level country, beautifully cultivated, and bearing everywhere the marks of thrift, till about eight

in the morning, when we made a short halt for rest and breakfast. By this time the men were beginning to be foot-sore, not being accustomed to marching. They, however, kept up with the soldiers, proving to them that if not so used to it, they would not be left in the rear. After a hasty meal we proceeded, and soon the hot sun and dust began to tell on all of us, especially the New Hampshire men, who were on their first long march. On our left we heard firing from the gunboats, which were shelling the woods and proclaiming our approach to the enemy. Our men took off their shoes, and bare-footed they toiled at the pieces, lifting on them at the numerous ditches and bad places with which the road was filled. About eleven o'clock we came up with the general and the other two regiments, which we had thought were behind us. They had taken the right road, and though starting some hours after we did, had been waiting there some time for us to come up. There was also with them the two guns belonging to the Zouaves, which Colonel Howard had succeeded in landing and bringing along behind the army wagons, these having been landed from the

Slade and used to convey the blasting apparatus and powder.

We now continued our march, though most of us were pretty well used up. About half-past twelve Colonel Howard, who was in advance with the skirmishers, discovered the enemy well posted at the far end of a large open plain, through which the road ran and on which several houses had been burned and were still smouldering. He at first thought the enemy had left, but when within about five hundred yards they opened fire on him from their battery, placed across the road. He observed well their position, while an aide was sent to hurry forward the artillery, and as fast as it could be got to the front it was by him stationed for action. As for us with the guns, we needed no orders to go forward, but with the first sound of "the cannon's opening roar," strained every nerve and muscle to get to the front.

By this time the men were quite exhausted, and the road had become almost impassable on account of mud. Just as Lieutenant Fearing rode back to us with orders, and we were trying our best to get

the guns out of the mire, in which they were nearly axle deep, both mules jumped clear out of the harness, and it seemed for a short time as though we were never to get any nearer the enemy. The infantry had already given out, and could render us no assistance; but by constant urging and encouragement, our men, fatigued as they were from continued hard work, managed at last to get the guns out of the mud and soon into a good position in front of the enemy. Then commenced an artillery duel, with four guns on each side. The enemy's firing was very good, and their shot fell among us thick and fast; but we gave them as good as they sent, and the colonel, who was watching our fire, was well pleased at the result. The general had meantime ridden up to us and ordered me to keep the enemy occupied while he sent a couple of regiments to flank them. Now that we were at last fighting in good earnest, our men forgot their fatigue and behaved splendidly. A prettier fight could not have been desired.

Up to this time the Marines had been working all of the guns, but now Lieutenant Morris of the

Zouaves came out to us with a detail from his regiment, and took charge of and fought their two pieces. They had only just learned that their guns had been brought forward by Colonel Howard, and supposed they were still on the transports. With this addition to our force we made lively work for the rebels, and kept their battery employed while the infantry were being stationed preparatory to a general assault. By occasionally moving our guns a little we avoided much damage to ourselves, and at the same time planted our shell into the midst of the enemy. They fired only solid shot, so I suppose they had no shells with them, else we should have suffered more severely. After giving time for the flank movement we ceased firing, as the enemy had already done so, and we thought they had fled.

Colonel Hawkins now formed his regiment and prepared for an attack in front. When within some four hundred yards, he observed the enemy posted on the edge of the woods, and at once charged at the head of his men, who, with their wild yell, rushed ahead in fine style, but were received with such a shower of canister from the rebel battery and so

furious a discharge of musketry from the Georgians posted in the woods behind the trees, that they were completely staggered and fell back on the Eighty-ninth New York, which were behind them. They at once rallied, and with the other two regiments kept up a good fight. The infantry firing was now heavy, and quite a lively battle was in progress. The Sixth New Hampshire moved up in line of battle and delivered a volley at the word of command, which was as well executed as though they had been on parade. Though the resistance of the enemy was stubborn, and they were well protected by the woods, still they could not withstand the attack of our troops, and after a while withdrew up the road toward the bridge.

During this time we moved forward with our guns to within good canister distance, and by sharp work succeeded in drawing the fire of their battery again. But so effective were our discharges, together with the furious onslaught of the infantry, that we finally compelled them to "limber to the rear," and the day was ours; not, however, till they had given us a good dose of canister, which, fortunately, was not

very destructive. Some of us were struck, but it was mostly spent and did us little harm.

Feeling satisfied with our day's work, we took positions assigned us to prevent surprise, and at once began to think of something to eat. A heavy thunderstorm now came up, and our boys took possession of an old cow-shed that had not been burned, and thus secured partial shelter from the rain. The foragers brought in hens, geese and pigs, and preparations were in progress for a fine supper, when a message from headquarters caused me to appear before the general. I at once received orders to mount a horse that had been captured from a rebel picket by our colonel, and return to the fleet and arrange with Commander Rowan for two or three of the gunboats to come up the river and take on board our wounded. It was now about half-past five o'clock in the afternoon, and the landing place was fourteen miles away; but hastily swallowing a little coffee and bread, and accompanied by one of the negroes on a mule as a guide, I was off like the wind, and just at dark hailed one of the steamers for a boat. Covered with mud and wet through, I

presented myself on board the flagship, and after attending to the duty assigned me, went on board our vessel and was soon fast asleep in my own berth, with nothing to molest me till morning.

I remember that Captain Thomas Poynton Ives was on board the flagship, where he had been dining with the flag officer, and was much amused at my appearance as I presented myself in the cabin. He was at that time in command of the Picket, which had been General Burnside's flagship.

When I left camp it was the intention of the general in command to push on at daylight the next morning and complete the work we had so well begun, but for reasons best known to himself, early in the night he ordered the troops into line and began the march back to the landing place. Colonel Howard, with our two howitzers and one company of infantry, composed the rear guard, which honor was considered by all to have been bravely earned and well merited.

It had been arranged by Commander Rowan that I was to go up the river on one of his gunboats the next morning, and so be enabled to join my com-

mand and be with them for further work. Judge then of my surprise at daylight in seeing on the river bank the advance of our troops, and of learning from them that the whole force had fallen back during the night. They immediately began to re-embark, and by afternoon we were on our way down the river. Four companies of the Eighty-ninth New York came down with us, and if ever there was a worn-out looking set of men, it was on board our boat. The crew all slung their hammocks and turned in for sleep, and to get a man on deck was next to impossible.

Thus ended the expedition to River Bridge, which, although not entirely successful, was in no way disastrous to us. The loss on our side was about one hundred, killed, wounded and missing. Many of these were of the Ninth New York Zouaves, Colonel Hawkins being shot through the arm, and the adjutant killed. The latter had been with the regiment only about a week, having just arrived from New York. We took a few prisoners belonging to a Georgia regiment, from whom we learned that the battery which had opposed us was the famous Hen-

ningson battery, named for the fillibuster of that name; and also that we were supposed to be the advance of the whole of General Burnside's command, about to attack Norfolk from that side. How much that fight had to do with it is not known to the writer, but it is certain that very shortly afterwards Norfolk was evacuated by the rebels, and we gained possession of the canal and surrounding country.

When General Burnside moved his army to join General McClellan, a few months later, he took a portion of it up through the canal to Norfolk, and I was for quite a time employed in carrying dispatches from Roanoke to Fortress Monroe, and keeping open the canal. I had two guns and twenty-five men on the steamer *Emily*, and made regular trips up and down all through the summer. In conversation with people who were in Norfolk at the time of our fight at Camden, they informed me that at the time we were falling back to the boats that night, the rebels were in full retreat toward Norfolk, and all the available forces were being mustered to assist General Wise in the defense of that city; but so few were they in numbers, that had General Burnside been so

disposed, he could have taken the city very easily. As it turned out, however, it was just as well that he remained quietly in New Berne with his army, and let them evacuate at their leisure.

I have thus briefly and imperfectly sketched one of the early incidents of the War of the Rebellion. If less important in its results than some of the subsequent events of our great national drama, it will always deserve its place in the theatre of that great struggle, which, though it has left a dark void in many a household, is ever alive in thrilling reminiscences and immutable friendships.

