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Soldiers' and Sailors' Historical Society
OF RHODE ISLAND.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES:
Third Series No. 17.

Relief of Washington, North Carolina, by the
Fifth Rhode Island Volunteers.
WILLIAM W. DOUGLAS.

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PERSONAL NARRATIVES

OF EVENTS IN THE

WAR OF THE REBELLION,

BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE

RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

THIRD SERIES - No. 17.

PROVIDENCE:
PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.
1886.

RELIEF OF
WASHINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA,

BY THE

Fifth Rhode Island Volunteers.

PROVIDENCE PRESS COMPANY, PRINTERS.

BY
WILLIAM W. DOUGLAS,
[Late Captain Fifth Rhode Island Artillery.]

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RELIEF OF WASHINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA.

THE organization which became the Fifth Rhode Island Regiment was at first a battalion of five companies.

Though stationed during its term of service at a distance from the grand strategic movements of the armies which directly threatened the strongholds of the Confederacy, it was not deprived of the opportunity of doing faithful work in the suppression of the Rebellion. From the nature of its employment it had more than once the opportunity to make as a battalion an individual and peculiar record.

Embarking at Annapolis on the good ship "Kitty Simpson," it weathered the storm at Hatteras, and after lying stranded on the bar at the inlet from noon till four o'clock, was safely wafted by the rising tide to an anchorage within the roadstead. Then it being impossible to get the "Kitty Simpson"

over the river-bar, the battalion was placed upon the "S. R. Spaulding," the flag-ship of the expedition, and with General Burnside led the fleet towards Roanoke Island. Here it had the honor of shedding the first blood in the person of Corporal Viall, who was wounded in a boat reconnoissance the day before the battle.

At Newbern it participated with the Fourth Rhode Island in the final charge which started the enemy in full retreat, and which made Colonel Rodman, who led it, a Brigadier General.

During the siege of Fort Macon the Fifth, though composed only of five companies, stood its turn in the trenches with the Fourth Rhode Island and the Eighth Connecticut, and had the good fortune to be in the advance when the fort surrendered, and marched with its colors, just received from home and never before unfurled, to plant them on the captured walls.

When in the summer of 1862, General Burnside was ordered with Reno's and Park's divisions to the Potomac, the Fifth, on account of its numbers, was left behind and became part of the Eighteenth Army

Corps, to which General John G. Foster was assigned as commander. In August the regiment was ordered to Newbern, and encamped just outside the compact part of the city.

The regiment took part in the expedition to Goldsboro in December, 1862, which was successful in cutting the railroad which brought supplies to Richmond from the heart of the Confederacy, and being threatened by troops relieved from General Lee's army by Burnside's failure at Fredericksburg, retired in good order and without serious loss to Newbern.

In retaliation for the constant raids with which General Foster harassed the enemy, General D. H. Hill, on March 14, 1863, the anniversary of its capture, made an attack upon Newbern in force. Being repulsed at Fort Anderson, he retired and marched towards Washington.

The events which immediately followed gave the Fifth Regiment, under its new Colonel, Henry T. Sisson, a chance to write the most brilliant page of its history.

At this time, April, 1863, our forces, under the command of Major-General Foster, held the coast and

waters of North Carolina. The headquarters of the Department were at Newbern, the richest town in the State, situated on the Neuse river, about ninety miles from its mouth, at its junction with the Trent, and in former times the depot for shipment north of large quantities of turpentine and tar, and some cotton and tobacco. The city was compactly built, with many fine business blocks and private residences. It had two extensive hotels, one of which was burned by the rebels as they left. Here we had built forts and depots of supplies of all sorts, and traders from the north had occupied the deserted stores and drove a brisk traffic with the troops, and, it was whispered, also in contraband goods from the interior. Beside the forts, which were constructed so as to defend the town from an attack by land, a fleet of gunboats patrolled the river fronts and made our hold upon the the place secure.

The other permanent posts in our possession in the State of North Carolina were Washington, on the Tar river, distant from Newbern by land some thirty or forty miles, but by water about one hundred and fifty, Plymouth, at the head of Albemarle

Sound, at the mouth of the Roanoke river, and Roanoke Island, all within the Sounds; Hatteras Inlet, and Fort Macon, which protected Morehead City and Beaufort on the sea-shore.

After the failure of his attack upon Newbern, General Hill next appeared before Plymouth, and having first destroyed or captured the small naval force stationed in the river by the help of one of those formidable iron-clads with which the rebels did so much damage when they succeeded in making them float, turned the flank of the defenses from the water, and finally, after meeting a most gallant resistance from General Wessels and his little garrison, captured the works and made prisoners of the survivors.

I remember how distinctly the northeast wind brought to us in Newbern the sound of the heavy cannonading, and with what solicitude we waited for the news which came at last of the capture of Plymouth.

About the first of April, General Foster learning that Washington was to be the next point of Hill's attack, determined to meet the danger in person; so

ordering reinforcements to follow, he hastened to the defense and arrived before the city was invested. In his report made to the committee on the conduct of the war he thus describes the situation of affairs :

"I found the garrison, Forty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers, Twenty-seventh Massachusetts Volunteers, one company Third New York Artillery, one company Third New York Cavalry, one company First North Carolina Volunteers, and one company negroes armed, to number about twelve thousand men. Two naval gunboats and one armed transport, all under command of Commander R. Renshaw, were in the river in front of the town. The defenses of the town were well adapted to give efficiency to a small garrison, consisting of a small and strong field work on the key point, with a line of entrenchments surrounding the town, well flanked by the block-houses and redoubts. The supply of rations on hand was ample. The enemy's force was a whole corps, estimated to number twenty thousand (20,000) men, with fifty pieces of artillery. Dispositions to resist an assault were immediately made, the Forty-fourth Massachusetts manning the line about half way, and the Twenty-seventh the remainder, the artillery in Fort Washington and the cavalry in the town. The men worked willingly and hard in strengthening the lines, using shingles from dismantled houses for lack of shovels. Abatis were made, traverses erected, platforms for guns laid, and a portion of the ditches flooded by damming the surface drains. All intercourse with the enemy, even by flags of truce, was peremptorily interdicted, leaving the enemy in uncertainty as to our force."

"The first three days of hesitancy by Hill in ordering the assault were so improved by us that, when ordered, it is reported that

the men refused to obey, seeing that we were ready for them, and that an assault, even if successful, would cost very dear. Hill then decided on a bombardment and siege. Batteries were commenced on all the ridges surrounding the town, and on Rodman's Point, across the river. This last was our vulnerable point, as it commanded the gunboats in the river and that side of the town."

After an unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the enemy from Rodman's Point, General Foster anticipating the destruction of the gunboats, fortified a small island lying in front of the town, with the intention of removing there the ordinance from the naval vessels, and so retaining the command of the river point. He proceeds as follows :

"While this was transpiring, the enemy's siege batteries on the land side were completed and armed, and at the end of about a week opened with fourteen guns, most of them rifled. Fort Washington replied, and the cannonading thus commenced continued with varying intensity for twelve days. The town was traversed in different directions by the shot and the lines of defense enfiladed, but by means of the protection of traverses, splinter proof shelters and bomb proofs, sufficient shelter was afforded and very little loss ensued. The consumption of ammunition exhausted the supplies at the end of the third day's firing, and its replenishment became a difficult and serious matter. The fleet of gunboats below the Hill's Point Battery were deterred from coming up by the obstructions (the buoy to the narrow passage through them being removed by the rebels) and by the fire of that battery.

"The relieving force, three thousand strong, under Brigadier-General Prince, which by my order had arrived in the river in transports, was not made effective. To my written order to land and take the Hill's Point Battery by assault, General Prince returned the reply that it was impracticable, and did not even make the attempt. Our only way, therefore, to get ammunition was by row-boats and small sailboats running the blockade of the enemy's batteries at night. These finally had to be armed to enable them to force a passage through the enemy's guard boats, placed to intercept them. In this way we obtained at night the ammunition for the next day's firing, and thus were enabled to maintain the fire from day to day."

The battery at Hill's Point, about five miles from Washington, spoken of by General Foster, was placed upon a bluff fifty to seventy-five feet above the water, with steep sides towards the river and Blount's Creek, which empties into the Pamlico just below the Point. Here were mounted twelve guns, including two Whitworths. Opposite this was Swan Point, where several guns were mounted near the water's edge. Across the channel at this point had been driven a triple line of piles, strengthened by chains and various obstructions.

At Rodman's Point, directly opposite the town, on a level with the bank of the river, were mounted

one thirty-two-pounder and eight field guns, one a twenty-pound Whitworth. After we entered Washington we found shot from this gun in the batteries on the further side, where it had been thrown completely across the town.

So near were the rebel batteries to the defenses of Washington, as we found when we had joined General Foster, that in one of the redoubts the garrison ran to seek shelter first behind one parapet and then behind the other in turn, as the sentry who was posted to give the warning to dodge the enemy's fire, cried out "Widow Blunt's" or "Rodman's Point."

To us in Newbern only came the sound of the cannonading and rumors of the brave defense which General Foster and the troops in Washington were making. We did not know till afterwards of the reinforcements lying inactive on the transports, or of his repeated orders to effect a diversion for his relief.

On Wednesday, the eighth of April, General Palmer, who was left in command of the District of Newbern, decided to make an effort for the relief of

Washington by a land expedition which should attack the enemy in the rear, and at the same time cover the city of Newbern. So little confidence was felt in the success of this measure that the command of it was intrusted to a General whose military reputation could not be damaged by any event.

All the troops in the city except the Fifth Rhode Island, Forty-fifth Massachusetts, and a few companies in the various forts, were ordered to join the expedition. Immediately after their departure the Fifth and Forty-fifth were assigned places to be taken in case of attack behind the line of fortifications, and when the line was stretched the entire length of the defenses, each soldier was just within hearing of his neighbors on the right and left. It was a skirmish line with widely extended intervals.

The distrust of the situation which filled the minds of the higher officers, and which it was said caused the records and personal baggage of the headquarters to be placed on board a swift transport with steam up, communicated to the body of citizens, sutlers, traders and speculators, produced such a panic in the market as would have been joyfully

hailed by the soldiers if they could have left the lines to take advantage of it.

It was both instructive and amusing to note the different effects of the threatened danger upon the storekeepers whose property was at stake, and the soldiers who had only their lives to lose, and who had risked them too often to be overcome by apprehension.

On the tenth, General Spinola's expedition returned unsuccessful. They had met the enemy in force at Blount's Creek, just below Hill's Point, and a few miles from the river, a place strong by the nature of the ground, and defended by earthworks and artillery. Here Captain Belger, of the Seventh Rhode Island Battery, was wounded, and after some further losses a retreat was ordered and promptly executed.

I have since understood that previous to this trial an attempt had been made to capture the enemy's batteries in the Pamlico river, but we heard nothing of it at the time, and if it were made it was entirely without effect. Probably the statement was based on the orders spoken of by General Foster

which were not obeyed. It seemed, therefore, that General Foster must be left to his fate, to endure a longer or shorter siege with capture and a rebel prison at the end.

But Colonel Sisson, who had recently joined the Fifth, and who was anxious to distinguish himself and his command by some daring exploit, called his officers together and proposed to them to volunteer to run by the enemy's batteries and join the beleaguered garrison with supplies of food and ammunition. The plan seemed a desperate one, but the officers, to a man, agreed with the Colonel that the state of the department demanded that its commander should be at Newbern to stem the panic, to direct measures of defense, and to bring order out of fast-gathering confusion. To rescue him at any cost we deemed our first duty, and the Colonel's plan was the only possible one. So the proposition was made to General Palmer and accepted, and with sixty rounds of ball cartridge and three days' cooked rations we were marched on board the "Escort," which lay at the wharf.

General Palmer and Lieutenant-Colonel Hoffman,

Assistant Adjutant-General on General Foster's staff, accompanied us. There were also on board a few stragglers from the company of the North Carolina Regiment which was at Washington.

The "Escort" was a side-wheel river steamboat, similar to those which run on Narragansett Bay, except that was decked over to the bows. Her registered burden was six hundred and seventy-five tons; her length one hundred and eighty-five feet, just five tons less burden and one foot greater length than the "Bay Queen." She had recently been built at Mystic, Connecticut, and was very fast in smooth water. We found on board commodious quarters for our three hundred men, and plenty of room for the fifteen to twenty tons of ammunition and half dozen barrels of commissary's stores which we were confident, would make us welcome at Washington.

After a night's sail down the turbid current of the Neuse, and over a short distance of the Sound, stretching far away towards the low line of sandy banks which separate its waters from the ocean, we found ourselves at daybreak just entering the Pamlico river, and by the time that the rising sun

showed us the indistinct promontories on its banks all were alert and eager for the first sight of the enemy's batteries. But our surprise was great when, on rounding Maul's Point, several miles below Hill's, we found ourselves in the midst of the gun-boat fleet which we had pictured in our imagination engaged at close quarters with the rebel works.

General Palmer here left us to become the guest of Captain Behm, of the "Southfield," the senior officer of the squadron, and our men who had expected to escort him to Washington saw him no more.

This day (Saturday, eleventh) was spent in loading bales of hay upon the "Escort," and piling it on the upper and lower decks around the machinery and boilers, furnishing such protection as we could to the vital points of the vessel.

The pilot-house, like that of most of the transport steamers then employed in the Sound, was protected from musket shot on the sides by boiler-iron plates—and we added a few bales of hay to make it more secure. The front was necessarily open, to give the pilot a view of his course.

The orders were to start at eight o'clock that night, but were countermanded by the substitution of five o'clock the next morning. For some unexplained reason we did not get underway in the morning till eight o'clock. The plan was for the gun-boats to engage the battery, allow the "Escort" to shoot by, and then to follow us. But we were much faster than any of the naval vessels, and a dense fog so effectually shut out every object from our sight that we had gone a hundred yards beyond the gun-boats who were to support us before a gun was fired, and without knowing where we were until we were apprised of our temerity by a few scattering shots from Hill's Point, and by hearing the chain cable running through the hawse-holes of the "Southfield" as she came to anchor behind us. We dropped back to a safe distance from the Point, and when the fog cleared up had the pleasure of seeing the execution which the big navy guns could do at long range. After about an hour's firing they drew off and rejoined us. So nothing more was done on Sunday in the way of carrying out our object.

On Monday morning, General Palmer reverted

again to the idea of landing our force below Hill's Point, on the opposite side of the creek, then fording it, as it had already been demonstrated to his mind by the former expedition that the bridge further up could not be carried, then capturing the rebel battery and so freeing the river for the navy and transports. If we had numbered three thousand, like General Prince's command, who had been ordered by General Foster to make a similar attempt, the plan might have been feasible, but with three hundred men to assault an almost impregnable position well garrisoned and having more than ten thousand reserves not more than five miles distant, was one of those undertakings that we did not crave to engage in. It did not seem to us to be the thing we had come from Newbern to do.

Hearing that a reconnoissance of the enemy's position at and about Hill's Point was to be ordered, I obtained permission to command it. I selected Lieutenant Dutee Johnson, of Company A, and forty men out of the whole regiment, who to my great satisfaction volunteered to accompany me. We were transferred to the gunboat "Valley City,"

Acting Master Brooks, and steamed slowly towards the shore. The decks were cleared for action, the men at quarters, and my little detachment enjoyed the privilege which few landsmen have had, of being on board a man-of-war in fighting trim. Occasionally, as we sighted a knot of men on the shore, we gave them a shot, and the precision with which our guns were aimed was a delight to the visitors of the Fifth. Soon the shore was neared, and taking to the boats under cover of the shells of the gunboat, we landed.

It was obviously impossible to land any force on the north side of Blount's Creek, and my instructions were to ascertain if the creek was fordable between its mouth and the bridge. I remained on shore nearly all day, carefully exploring the course of the stream, and came off again about sunset with the information derived from actual soundings that the creek could not be forded or crossed in the force of any opposition, and so reported to General Palmer. I also ascertained from reliable contrabands that there was a camp of about five thousand men within a mile of the opposite bank, and saw

breastworks lately thrown up, but with no guns mounted, almost at the water's edge.

When I carried this information to the General on board the "Southfield," he saw that his plan was impossible, and sent again for Colonel Sisson. When he arrived and asked for orders, General Palmer told him that he would not order us to run the blockade; but would permit us to do so voluntarily if Colonel Sisson would assume the whole responsibility. As this was what we had been waiting to do, our preparations were speedily perfected to run by the batteries in the "Escort" in the darkness of the approaching evening.

In order to appreciate the risk we were to run, you may imagine yourselves starting from Newport on the "Bay Queen" on a trip to Providence. Place upon Nayatt Point a battery of heavy guns, and on the shore at Conimicut Point another, both well manned by experienced artillerymen. Suppose the channel to run within point-blank range of the western shore, and to be obstructed by a triple line of piles driven closely together. Then place a still more formidable battery, containing at least one gun

capable of throwing a shell three miles with accuracy, at Field's Point, and calculate the chances of getting by all this and anchoring safely at the Continental Steamboat Company's wharf. Then place on the boat fifteen tons of ammunition, and consider that if a shell were to explode so as to fire it, there would be no boat left, and you would have the last chance left you of swimming ashore into the hands of the enemy, who, if they did not shoot you in the water, would march you to a rebel prison. Add to this the fact that no one on board knew the channel except the pilot, and he had to grope for it without a beacon light, in intense darkness, and to have got upon the flats meant sure capture at daybreak. We had not either that opportunity to fire back which occupies a man's whole attention to the exclusion of thoughts of his personal danger in the excitement of a battle. We had simply to box ourselves up and constitute ourselves a floating target.

Colonel Sisson stowed all the men in the hold of the boat, as near as possible to the water line, and sent all the officers who were not on special duty into the cabin. Lieutenant-Colonel Tew, Captain

Landers, who was the officer of the day, and Captain Potter, who commanded a squad of sharpshooters, were entrenched on deck; protected partially by the bales of hay. Colonel Sisson took his station with the captain and pilot in the pilot-house.

At eight o'clock it had become so dark that any object but a large white steamboat like the "Escort" was invisible at a short distance on the water. I had been much fatigued by my tramp on shore and the responsibility of my service during the day, and as soon as we were assigned to our quarters lay down upon the cabin floor upon a mattress taken from one of the bunks, and was fast asleep when we started. I was roused by the flash and report of the first gun which announced that we were in range of Hill's Point Battery.

The flash illuminated the cabin, and the concussion of the air sounded to us below like the crash of a shot. We all thought the boat was struck, and expected every moment to be wounded by flying splinters. Instantly I was wide awake, and in the total darkness which followed, for all lights on board had been extinguished, I listened for and felt the

progress we were making. After the first discharge I felt the boat go forward with tremendous speed, then stop, and again slowly press forward. This was the passage of the line of piles abreast of the battery. The boat forced a passage through, and again we were in rapid motion. But suddenly I felt the keel grate on the bottom, and we were aground in full range of the rifled guns aimed at our lives. To add to the horror of the situation, we supposed from the concussion of the air that every shot of the iron shower struck the boat. Quick as lightning the guns followed each other, and the flashes showed us each others' faces anxious but determined. But the moment was too desperate to weigh chances, and putting on extra steam, forcing the furnaces to their full capacity, preferring to blow up by that means, if it must be so, rather than to be wrecked by some shell falling into our ammunition, we gradually push through the mud and are again in deep water, hurrying away from our first danger.

We had taken the Hill's Point Battery unawares, and were not discovered till almost abreast of it; but

we could not hope that Rodman's Point would be unprepared. The heavy firing below would bring the garrison to their guns, prepared to receive us warmly. But we had not come thus far to retreat. Indeed, we had no choice—the danger in either direction was equal. Riflemen now assailed us from every prominent position on the river's bank, but their missiles could do us little harm, and congratulating ourselves that we were yet uninjured, we hastened to the upper battery. Soon the heavy firing, the flashes, and the thuds of the shot, nearer and more rapid than before, told us that we were under the last fire, and thus passing the last mile, as it seemed in a few minutes, we stopped again.

The Chaplain's voice at the companion-way, and the music of the Forty-fourth Regiment Band, hailed our arrival at the wharf at Little Washington. Scarcely realizing our own safety, and each amazed at the safety of the rest, we formed in line and left the good boat which, with the loss of a trifling piece of her machinery, had borne us well by the fruitless efforts of the rebel artillery.

Our arrival was equivalent to a reinforcement of

ten times our number to the weary garrison, and the success of our efforts inspired them with fresh confidence. We were most warmly received by the Forty-fourth, whose brief term of enlistment had been marked by as faithful service and more varied incident than many a three years' regiment. They welcomed us to their quarters and offered us the best of their reserved stores.

The next morning we took our position in the fortifications and renewed with fresh energy the work we had learned in the trenches before Fort Macon.

The second day after, the rebels, not knowing how few men had broken through the blockade, and feeling that it was no longer effectual, withdrew their forces and joined the army which was to humble the prowess of our valiant men under Hooker at Chancellorsville.

The morning after our arrival I was called to General Foster's headquarters, and in answer to his questions gave him an account of the condition of affairs in Newbern, and that day embarking on the "Escort" he ran down past the batteries in broad

daylight. In this trip the pilot was killed by a musket ball, and seven or eight of the crew were killed and wounded, but the boat seemed to have a charmed life and carried him safely to Newbern, where, organizing his forces, he started at once to attack the besiegers. But as I have said, they had given up the siege, and he only succeeded in engaging their rear guard, and then returned to Newbern.

The gratitude of the Forty-fourth Massachusetts for our timely succor was shown by the presentation by them to the Fifth of an elegant banner with the arms of the two States gracefully combined upon it, and an appropriate inscription commemorating the occasion of the gift. They also gave to Colonel Sisson, as a mark of their appreciation of his action, a service of plate and a sword, sash and belt.

The War Department were pleased to recognize the exploit by changing the regiment from infantry to artillery, thinking that men who were not to be killed by heavy guns would do good service behind them; and after this promotion *en masse* the subsequent service of the Fifth justified the exceptional honor.

