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Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society of Rhode Island.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES  
OF EVENTS IN THE  
WAR OF THE REBELLION.

No. 5. SECOND SERIES.



THE BATTLES OF ROANOKE ISLAND

AND

ELIZABETH CITY.

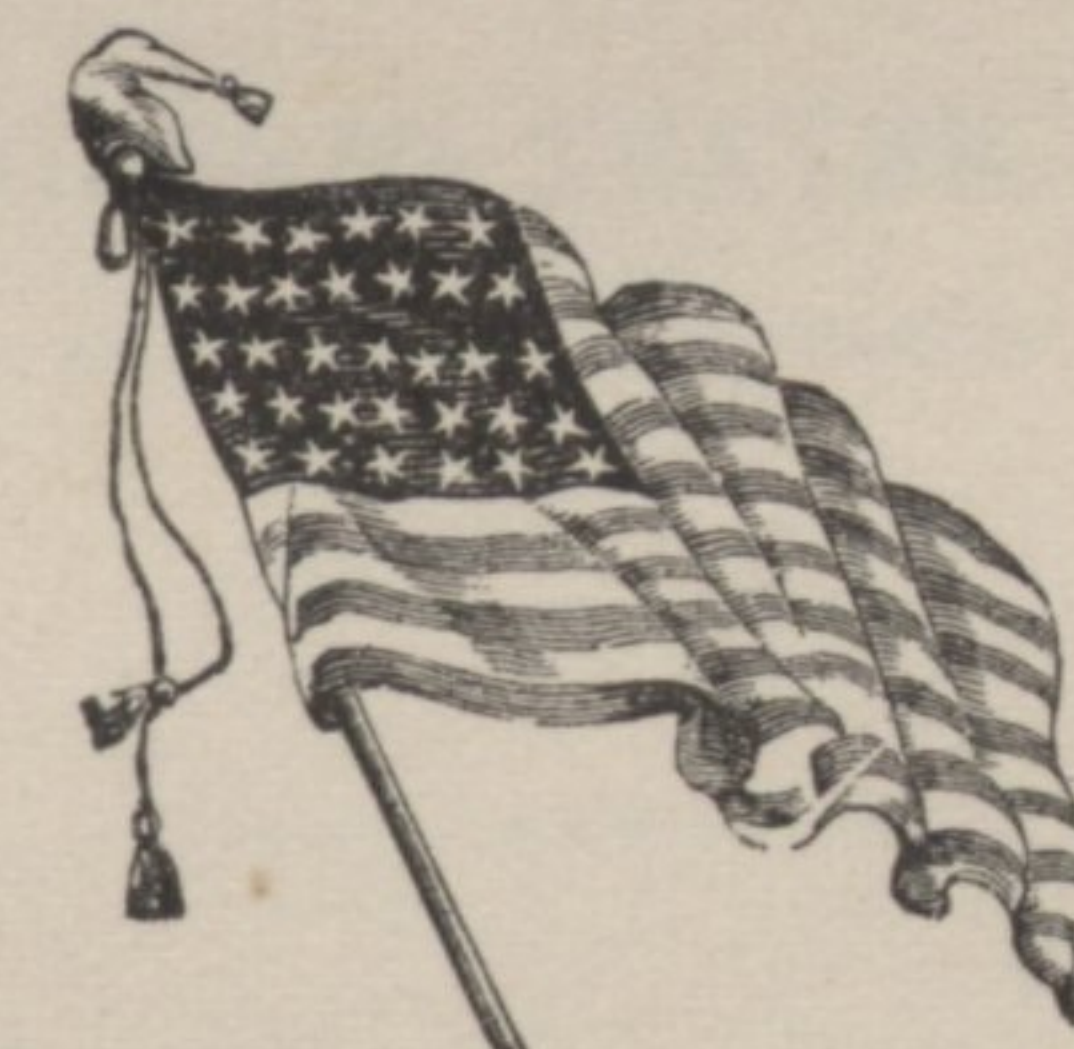
BY

LORENZO TRAVER, M. D.



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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.  
No. 5. . . . SECOND SERIES.



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BATTLES

OF

ROANOKE ISLAND

AND

ELIZABETH CITY.

BY LORENZO TRAVER, M. D.,

[LATE ACTING ASSISTANT SURGEON UNITED STATES NAVY.]

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## BATTLES OF ROANOKE ISLAND

AND

## ELIZABETH CITY.

[READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY, DECEMBER 10, 1879.]

November 22d, 1861, I received my commission as Acting Assistant Surgeon in the United States Navy, with orders to report to Commodore Pendergrast, at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, for duty on board the United States steamer Delaware. I lost no time in arranging my business, in order that I might serve my country at the time when the services of every loyal man was required to assist in crushing the hydra of rebellion. I found the Delaware not ready for sea, but in the course of a few days time, after all of the officers had reported for duty and the vessel had received her armament and gone into



commission, we bade good-bye to the old Quaker City, and steamed down the Delaware river to Fort Mifflin, where we received our ammunition (such as shot, grape, canister and shrapnell, with the requisite amount of powder) to be used, we knew not where, and in the afternoon of December thirteenth we arrived at Fortress Monroe, where we anchored for further orders.

The officers of the Delaware at the time of sailing were :—

Lieutenant—Stephen P. Quackenbush.  
 Acting Master—Luke B. Chase.  
 Acting Assistant Surgeon—Lorenzo Traver.  
 Acting Assistant Paymaster—Frederick R. Curtis.  
 Acting Master's Mate—James H. Kernes.  
 Acting Master's Mate—James H. Spriggman.  
 Acting Master's Mate—Josiah H. Hammond.  
 Acting Master's Mate—James H. Raymond.  
 Acting Second Assistant Engineer—John D. Williamson.  
 Acting Third Assistant Engineer—Asaph Dunbar.  
 Acting Third Assistant Engineer—Theodore J. Brown.  
 Acting Third Assistant Engineer—John Davis.

At this period of the rebellion, the city of Norfolk and the Gosport Navy Yard were held by the rebels, and on several occasions, the rebel gunboats had

run down Elizabeth river into Hampton Roads, and made an attack on our gunboats and transports that were lying in the "Roads." I remember on one occasion, it being Sunday morning soon after breakfast, the rebel steamers were seen approaching our fleet. Orders were signaled from the flagship Minnesota to weigh anchor and engage the enemy. We did so, and in a short time we were blazing at each other, at long range, coming nearer and nearer, but the enemy deemed it advisable to retreat under the protection of the guns of a large sand battery, situated on Craney island, at the mouth of Elizabeth river. If any were injured, we never were able to learn the number.

This was the first time that I was under an enemy's fire, and thought, probably as all do, that it was an engagement of considerable magnitude. Although the shot and shell passed over us, and dropped all around the vessel, still we were fortunate in not receiving any injury.

After the lapse of several days, the gunboats, army transports loaded down with soldiers, and schooners with ammunition, provisions, horses and



forage for the same, began to arrive almost without number, until the whole roadstead was nearly filled with vessels. In the evening it presented a beautiful sight; the several lights on each vessel, dancing about at the will and pleasure of the waves, looking more like a large city afloat, than it did like a fleet of vessels laden with death-destroying weapons.

Up to this time we knew not where our destination would be, but of course surmised that it was some point inland, or along the southern coast, where an attack would soon be made.

January 12th, 1862, late in the afternoon, every one was ordered on board from the shore, and smoke could be seen issuing from the smoke-stacks of each gunboat and transport; the sailors on the different vessels hove their anchors short, and unfurled their sails preparatory to a move; every one could be seen moving about here and there, all showing that something unusual was about to occur. No doubt by this time every commanding officer had received his sealed orders, to remain unopened until arriving at a certain latitude and longitude, then to be made known to the officers and men under his command.

As the sun was going down, the gunboats, transports, and vessels of all kinds connected with the expedition, could be seen wending their way out of the harbor, in a southerly direction; and in a short time not a vessel could be seen, where only a few hours before a large fleet, counted by hundreds, lay peaceably at anchor. During the night everything passed off pleasantly; the sea was quite smooth, with very little breeze, but towards morning the wind began to increase, and by noon it was blowing a fearful gale. We passed several gunboats, schooners, brigs, etc., all apparently centering towards one point, viz., Hatteras inlet, where we arrived January thirteenth, in the afternoon.

On our way down we passed a large bark, loaded with soldiers, with union down; in other words, she was in distress. We ran alongside, and found that she wanted to be taken in tow. We told them that we could not render any assistance, as we had all we could do to get along safely. Soon after a large steamer went to her assistance.

At the time we passed over the outer bar and through the inlet, the sea was very rough, and no



channel to be seen—nothing but one mass of white capped waves and foam—although we crossed over the bar to the harbor in safety, leaving on our port side the transport steamer City of New York, loaded with military stores, hard and fast on a sand bar, with the sea washing over her deck with every wave, and the waves running with such fearful velocity that no boat could go to her assistance. It was a cold, wintry day, and the breakers as they struck the ship, caused her to quiver from stem to stern. The seamen lashed themselves to the rigging, where they remained, without food, without sleep, drenched to the skin, for forty hours, until the storm abated. No help could reach them. Every endeavor was made to send them aid, and two heroic men, Colonel Allen and Surgeon Wellar, perished in the attempt, but all in vain. At length, after the storm had nearly exhausted itself, a steam-tug succeeded in reaching the wreck, and the sufferers, half dead, were rescued.

The second engineer was the last to leave the ship. He remained lashed to the mast until every other man had left. Then climbing to the top-mast,

he cut down the flag, and winding it around his body, bore it in triumph away. "I was determined," said he, "either to die beneath the folds of the stars and stripes, or to bear them safely to land." It is needless to say that the vessel and cargo was a total loss.

All day vessels came filing in one after another, and by sunset the little harbor was literally packed with craft of all kinds and descriptions,—small and large schooners, brigs, barks, side-wheel and propeller gunboats, with a few of the New York and Brooklyn ferry boats, altered over to gunboats; in fact, everything was pressed into the service that drew but little water, as before proceeding to operate against the enemy, it was first necessary to cross what is called "Buckhead Shoal," an expanse of quicksand which had long been the terror of navigators. It is about a mile wide, with a tortuous channel leading through it, varying with the ever-shifting quicksands of the bottom, and with not over six feet of water at high tide.

On arriving at the inlet, we found the United States steamer Philadelphia, which was to be the flag-ship, with flag-officer Commodore Louis M.



Goldsborough on board, who had command of the naval part of the expedition, with Commander Stephen C. Rowan as fighting captain, whose headquarters was to be on board the United States steamer Delaware.

Several days were occupied in getting the vessels over the bar. The transports were loaded with soldiers, some sixteen thousand or more, and all kinds of provisions and munitions of war, and everything being in readiness, at nine o'clock on the morning of February fifth the Delaware gave a general signal for all the vessels—some three hundred—to get under way. They were soon running up Pamlico sound in a column, and part of the way were strung out in file of four or five abreast—all, however, kept near enough to be signaled. The weather was delightful, but cool, and all were in the best of spirits—only too glad to have something to relieve the monotony of the last three weeks, which had been passed in inactivity in the sound. In all there were some twenty gunboats. General Burnside had selected the steamer Picket as his flag-ship, or headquarters during the naval engagement.

At five o'clock in the afternoon we were in sight, and within ten miles of the island, and anchored for the night. It was a beautiful sight to look down the sound and witness the movements of the fleet, as the vessels moved up—one continuous line as far as the eye extended. After the shades of night had gathered around us, one of the steamers went up the sound towards the island to reconnoitre.

On the morning of February sixth the clouds were passing to and fro, as if they anticipated some commotion or shock below. About ten o'clock the Delaware's signal for the whole fleet to get under way and "Prepare for Action," was run up to the mast-head; and instantly, all through the squadron, there was a general beating to quarters, and in a few minutes the whole fleet was moving up towards the island, the whole of General Burnside's army accompanying us, when a rebel steamer was seen coming towards our fleet. She stopped a moment to watch our movements, and then left for rebeldom. Every one was busy preparing for the conflict which was about to come off. Soon rain began to fall in torrents, and it became very foggy, when a consultation



of war was held on board of the Delaware, and it was decided to come to anchor for the day, only five miles from the rebel batteries. How discouraging, when only a few hours before our hopes were buoyed up with the prospect of giving the rebels a good whipping, to have them blasted a few minutes later by the sudden change in the weather.

Some three miles above, at the outlet of Pamlico and the entrance of Albemarle sounds, were seen eight rebel gunboats drawn up in line of battle, ready to receive us. In addition to some twenty gunboats, we had six launches connected with the fleet, which were designed to land men, each holding some thirty or forty, and each armed with a twelve-pound howitzer in the bow.

Roanoke island, as you all doubtless are aware, is two and one-half miles wide and sixteen miles long, bearing a little to the northwest and southeast, between Pamlico and Albemarle sounds, and just inside of a strip of sand beach ranging from one-quarter of a mile to two miles wide, extending along the whole coast of North Carolina. The passage to be contested, situated between the is-

land on the right and the main land on the left, was about one and a half to two miles wide, with sunken vessels and a row of piles driven down, extending across the channel from shore to shore, some ten feet apart, only leaving a passage-way just wide enough for their vessels to pass through. This narrow passage was thoroughly guarded by five forts on the island, and one large fort opposite, on the main land, and with eight rebel gunboats drawn up in line of battle, extending across the passage from the island to the opposite shore, making the rebel defences on both sides and ahead of the attacking party, with Pamlico sound in the rear. About two thousand five hundred men manned the batteries on the island, and at Nag's Head, on the outer beach, five thousand. Such were the formidable preparations which the rebels had made for defense.

The object of this "*cheval de frise*" was to prevent the union forces from passing up Albemarle sound and through the Currituck Canal and Dismal Swamp to obtain a foothold in the rear of Norfolk and Gosport Navy Yard which were held at that time by the enemy, making a very strong point for the rebels



to hold, as it gave them an opportunity to build vessels and iron-clads, one of the latter class, the Merrimack, came near destroying the small naval fleet left at Hampton Roads, in March, 1862, to protect the fortifications at the entrance of Hampton Roads and the mouth of James river—which would prevent the rebel iron-clads escaping from Norfolk, and running up the James, to join their forces at Richmond, or running by Fortress Monroe out to sea and along the northern and southern coasts, destroying the shipping or whatever might come in their way. The destruction of our fleet by the Merrimack would have been accomplished had it not been for the timely arrival of the Monitor, our first iron-clad, or “cheese box on a raft,” as it was called at that time.

February seventh, at nine o'clock in the morning, the weather was clear and warm, with a fair prospect for a pleasant day. Ten o'clock, the time for an attack had arrived, and the Delaware signaled to the whole fleet to get under way. The enemy was in sight, with their gunboats ahead, and the batteries on the right and left of us, when Nelson's famous order, modified for the occasion, was run to the mast-

head of the flag-ship: “America expects every man to do his duty.” This was responded to with a thunder-peal of cheers from all the ships. The fleet now entered Croatan strait, which is about one mile wide. The vessels as they advanced through the contracted channel stretched out about eight miles in length. All of the fortifications were soon in sight, and the whole upper half of the island seemed to be lined with batteries. The first one approached was on a spot called Park's Point. Opposite this battery were the sunken vessels and the first line of piles filling the channel. Behind this barricade, the rebel gunboats were stationed, so that in case they were disabled during the fight they could not be pursued.

At half-past eleven o'clock the first gun was fired from the flag-ship, and a portion of the fleet immediately engaged Park's Point battery, while others opened their broadsides upon the fleet, firing across the obstructions. At twelve o'clock we were close to the enemy. They had fired some half dozen shots, but all fell short of us. The Delaware fired her first shot at fifteen minutes past twelve. The firing rapidly increased, and the men were in excel-



lent spirits, having had an extra ration of grog. Their jokes and laughter could be distinctly heard between the discharge of the artillery.

After the gunboats were driven away, the whole fleet concentrated their fire on the batteries. The rebel troops, for some reason, did not vigorously respond. The appearance was, that they preferred the shelter of the casemates, to the exposure of standing by their guns. With glasses, the shot and shell could be seen falling with great destructiveness in and around the enemy's works. Many of the gunboats approached very close to the shore, and poured in with wonderful precision, and rapidity, their destructive fire. Huge shells burst over our vessels, but caused no injury. At two o'clock, two new batteries opened fire on us, making five in all. The shells from our vessels set the forts on fire, and their destruction seemed inevitable. The flames, however, were soon extinguished, only to break out again with renewed vigor a few minutes later. The rebels had several large columbiads, and they worked them with great precision, but still very little damage was done to our fleet, owing to the continuous

movement of our vessels backward and forward, which caused them to get out of range of their guns. All the rebel gunboats kept close under the protection of their batteries.

While the bombardment by the gunboats was going on, the landing of the soldiers from the transports, who were to co-operate with the fleet, began. A boat from the Delaware, with a reconnoitering party, had first been sent towards the shore. They were fired upon by the rebels concentrated in the forest. The Delaware instantly pitched a few dozens of nine-inch shrapnell into the woods. No one could stand this, and the rebels fled, and the disembarkation continued unmolested. Two thousand rebels, with rifles and three heavy guns, had stationed themselves at this point, to prevent the landing. The shrapnell from the Delaware was so destructive, that, in their flight, the rebels abandoned their cannon, and even threw away many of their muskets, that they might run more swiftly.

In landing the troops by General Burnside, the water was so shoal that the launches could not approach close to the shore, and the men had to wade,



many times with the water to their waist, sinking deep in the soft mud. This was very exhausting, as every man had to carry his musket and heavy knapsack, and the water was icy cold.

During the action, one of the quarter gunners, who had charge of the magazine, obtained a key which fitted the spirit room, unlocked the door and helped himself. I chanced to go below, and found him and another gunner intoxicated, using threatening language about blowing up the ship. I hauled him out, shut the door, and reported them to the commanding officer, who had them put in double irons. Fortunately no accident occurred, but the thought of having an intoxicated man in the magazine was anything but pleasant.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the United States flag was raised at Ashley's Harbor. The cannonading was still raging at the battery. It continued unabated all day, and as the night was clear and the range was perfect, it did not cease with the going down of the sun. Nothing can be imagined more sublime than a bombardment by night. The glare of the guns, so spiteful in expression; the

roar of the explosions; the shrieking of the shells, as if demons were howling through the air; the bursting of the shells with meteoric brilliancy, and the volumes of smoke rising in the darkness; all these, blended with the gloom of night, presented a scene which, once witnessed, can never be forgotten. About one hour after dark the fleet drew off, and was silent and motionless for the remainder of the night. The land forces had indeed a cheerless prospect before them. Thoroughly drenched and chilled by the cold wintry waves, they were compelled to bivouac on the shelterless shore, without tents, exposed to a cold north wind and a heavy rain. Their discomfort through the night was extreme. The landing of all the forces from the transports had been effected with the loss of but four men killed and eight wounded.

During the naval conflict, the fleet had been severely handled by the heavy shot from the batteries and the rebel gunboats. Only a few of the crew were killed and wounded on board the national ships, although several shots passed through the vessels. The ships were not damaged enough to inter-



fere with the efficient action of the fleet, and all on the island and in the vessels waited impatiently, cheered with hope, for the opening of another day.

The morning of Saturday, the eighth, came. It was cold and dismal. The landing of troops had continued all night, and towards morning the whole sixteen thousand were encamped near the shore. The Delaware anchored close to the shore to protect them. At early daylight, the fleet opened fire upon the battery which the rebels still held. About nine o'clock, large reinforcements were conveyed to the upper end of the island by the rebel gunboats.

While the bombardment was going on fiercely, Lieutenant Jeffers was sent with eight gunboats to remove the obstructions, in order that our fleet might pass through into Albemarle sound. Firing from the battery continued, still the fleet worked heroically until the obstructions were removed and one by one the vessels passed through the gap, and anchored above in the sound. About the same time, the land forces were aroused from their comfortless bivouac, and started at early daylight, under command of General Reno, for a three miles march up the island to make

an attack on the rebels in their central stronghold. They were obliged to pick their way through thick undergrowth, and wade through deep morasses for two hours, when they came upon the enemy, strongly intrenched behind their ramparts. Their battery seemed to command the narrow causeway, this being the only path to the redoubt. General Foster's brigade, composed of the Twenty-third and Twenty-fifth Massachusetts and the Tenth Connecticut regiments, commanded by the young and heroic Colonel Russell, immediately commenced the assault with musketry and a few field pieces. General Reno groped through swamps knee-deep in mud, in order to obtain a more favorable position, and both men and officers co-operated heartily and heroically in this work. While thus engaged, General Burnside was on the beach pushing forward, as rapidly as possible, the disembarkation of the troops, and sending up reinforcements to aid the men in their attack.

At this time I requested and obtained permission from my commanding officer to go on shore and assist in caring for the wounded. General Foster was untiring in his exertions, leading his men with cour-



ageous example, and selecting the points in the redoubt most favorable for an attack. According to testimony, Colonel Russell was very much beloved by his men, and as he was cheering them on, a bullet pierced his heart, and without a word or a groan, he dropped dead. The advance of the assailants was slow, but firm. At length the ammunition was exhausted, and it became necessary to retire, or strive to take the battery by a desperate charge. Major Kimball, of the Hawkins Zouaves, just then came up and offered to lead the charge. "You are the very man," said General Foster, "and this is the very moment. Zouaves—STORM THE BATTERY!" In an instant they started, and sweeping like a gale across the narrow causeway, shouting their war-cry, "Zou, Zou, Zou," with a roar which rose above the clamor of the battle. The attack was so sudden and unexpected that the rebels hesitated for a moment in bewilderment, and then fled in a panic, leaving their wounded uncared for. As they rushed away from the fort, the Zouaves, with shouts, went climbing over the ramparts and through the embrasures into the vacated fort. The retreat of the rebels was cut

off by the movement of General Reno in one direction, while General Foster pushed on at double-quick following in their footsteps. The hot pursuit was kept up for nearly six miles by the national troops, crowding them so closely that it gave them no time to rally. Colonel Hawkins, pursuing a little different route, overtook a body of two hundred rebels, who surrendered without a struggle. General Reno fell in with a force of eight hundred rebels, under the command of Colonel Jorden, and compelled them to an unconditional surrender. Everything seemed to be working in favor of the national troops, when General Foster saw Colonel Pool, from the North Carolina Volunteers, with a flag of truce, approaching him, asking on what terms he would accept their capitulation. "Unconditional surrender," was the reply. "How much time can we have for consideration?" was then asked. "Only time to report to your superior officer." This surrender included all the batteries, all the troops upon the island, and all the defences. Over two thousand rebels laid down their arms, and before five o'clock the stars and



stripes were floating over Park's Point battery, and all fortifications on the island.

By this time the fleet had pushed through the barricade, and the national troops were in possession of the whole island, and the vast internal waters connected with Pamlico and Albemarle sounds. The coast was clear. Roanoke island was ours, and six forts, forty-two heavy guns, with a large quantity of smaller arms and munitions of war, with two thousand and five hundred prisoners, fell into the hands of the union forces. The union loss consisted of forty killed and two hundred wounded.

The following general order was issued by Commodore L. M. Goldsborough after the battle of Roanoke island:

"ROANOKE ISLAND, N. C., Feb'y 9th, 1862.

*To the officers and men under my command, engaged in the reduction of Roanoke Island:*

Your efforts of yesterday and the day before, against the enemy, were alike worthy of yourselves and the sacred cause our glorious flag upholds. I thank you for them, and congratulate you upon the results achieved. No Commander-in-Chief could have been more gallantly sustained, or could have desired a more gratifying display of courage, skill and discipline.

We have yet more work of the kind to accomplish, and will soon deliver another blow to crush the hydra of rebellion.

From what I have already witnessed, I am sure you will do it well.

Commodore L. M. GOLDSBOROUGH,  
Flag Officer Commanding North Atlantic Blockading Squadron."

The next day was the Sabbath, February ninth. It seemed to be necessary that the routed and demoralized foe should be pursued before he had time to gather his shattered forces for another defence. Fourteen vessels were dispatched under Commander Stephen C. Rowan to pursue the retreating rebel gunboats up Albemarle sound. They had fled to Elizabeth City, at the head of Pasquotank river, directly north about thirty-five miles. Elizabeth City, with two thousand inhabitants, was connected with Portsmouth and Norfolk, in Virginia, where the rebels were in great strength, by the Dismal Swamp canal. About sunset, the union gunboats anchored at the mouth of the river, fifteen miles below the city. There was no escape for the rebel fleet, they were completely entrapped, and their doom sealed. A vigilant watch was kept through the night.



The inhabitants of the city awaited the event with great anxiety. They did not dream that the union forces could pass the barricade and fortifications of Roanoke island, and were unprepared for the disaster bursting upon them. The rebel gunboats had anchored near the city for the purpose of offering all the resistance they could in defence of the town. As soon as daylight made its appearance, the squadron was again in motion, and when within five miles of the city we found seven gunboats drawn up in line of battle to receive us. There was a point of land jutting out about a fourth of a mile in front of the rebel fleet, and upon this a fort was constructed, mounting four guns. On the opposite side of the river from the fort was a floating battery, mounting two rifled guns. The passage between the battery and fort was only half a mile in width, through which the fleet must pass to reach the rebel gunboats. Inspired by Captain Rowan's command to engage the enemy at close quarters, the men immediately prepared for action. Orders were given for all vessels to advance under full head of steam. The flag-ship Delaware took the lead, not paying any

regard to the batteries, but plunged through the shot and shell falling about her in a perfect shower, with the whole fleet following, and before the rebels could recover from the shock of such an heroic attack, the national vessels plunged into the enemy's ships, running them down, and with sabre blows, and bayonet thrusts, our men were upon their decks. Nearly every man was killed, wounded or taken prisoner. A few of them, after setting their vessels on fire, jumped overboard and escaped to the shore. Thus ended one of the shortest and most spirited battles during the war. It lasted only fifteen minutes from the time the first blow was struck, until the stars and stripes were proudly floating over the vessels and fortifications. The union loss, in this truly heroic action was but two killed and twelve wounded. The crews who had escaped from the vessels, in their flight set fire to Elizabeth City, and nearly consumed the little village, consigning many families to want and helplessness.

Soon after the capitulation, the mayor of Elizabeth City, and the surgeon connected with the fort, came aboard the Delaware, and asked Captain Rowan if he



would allow me to go ashore to assist in amputating the arm of a rebel soldier, who was wounded at the battle of Roanoke island. After assuring Captain Rowan that they would return me in safety, I went with them, and on arriving at the house we found the poor fellow had more legs left than courage, and the former had conveyed him to a place where he could not be found. So I returned.

The following general order was issued by Commander Stephen C. Rowan after the battle of Elizabeth City:

"ELIZABETH CITY, N. C., February 11th, 1862.

The Commander of the flotilla in Albemarle Sound, avails himself of the earliest opportunity to make a public acknowledgment of the coolness, gallantry, and skill displayed by the officers and men under his command, in the capture and destruction of the enemy's batteries and squadron at Cobb's Point. The strict observance of the plan of attack, and the steady, but onward course of the ships without returning a shot until within three-quarters of a mile of the fort, excited the admiration of our enemies. The undersigned is particularly gratified at the evidence of the high discipline of the crews in refraining from trespassing in the least degree upon the private property of defenceless people, in a defenceless town.

The generous offer to go on shore and extinguish the flames applied by the torch of a vandal soldiery, upon the houses of its own defenceless women and children, is a striking evidence of the justice of our cause, and must have its effect in teaching our deluded countrymen a lesson in humanity and civilization.

Commander STEPHEN C. ROWAN,

Commanding Naval Flotilla in Albemarle Sound, North Carolina."



