

DEFENCE OF SPANISH FORT.

On Mobile Bay—Last Great Battle of the War.

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Who knows of "Spanish Fort"? Not many readers of the Herald I suspect, yet it was the scene of one of the most thrilling episodes of the war. It was one of the very last incidents, too, for we evacuated the place on the night of April 9, 1865, the day of Lee's surrender. Spanish Fort was one of the outer defenses of Mobile. It was situated about twelve miles below the city and across the bay, on the eastern shore. Look on the map of Alabama and turn to Mobile Bay. At the mouth you notice two islands almost closing the bay, having but a narrow passage. Guarding the passage and facing each other are Forts Gaines and Morgan. Further up the bay, on the eastern side, on a tongue of land not represented on the map, was Spanish Fort, and still further up nearer the city, was Blakely, another fortified place. The sole approach to the city through the bay was a tortuous and narrow channel, marked out by stakes, which ran zig-zag across to Blakely, then down to Spanish Fort and then on out to the Gulf; all the rest of the bay was filled with torpedoes and a variety of other obstructions. Early in March, 1865, the fifth company of Washington Artillery was having a "good time" in the city of Mobile. They had been detached from the veteran Army of Tennessee, and with it had just passed through the almost unparalleled hardships of Hood's disastrous Nashville campaign. Mobile was one of the protected cities of the South, one of the latest places, if not the very last, to feel the hand of war. Consequently a semblance of the ways of

peace still existed there. Coffee houses were in full blast where "coffee" could be bought for a dollar a cup, with an "ironclad" pie thrown in. Some of us had been paid and we indulged in reckless joy in boots at a cost of \$100 or so, or in "biled" linen shirts at a like fabulous sum. The band played in the city park and strenuous was the effort to get off from duty for a promenade there, or on "Government street," and truly inventive was the genius developed in the way of arranging or "getting up" toilets for the occasion.

DEFENDERS OF MOBILE.

One day orders came, to be ready to move at a moment's notice, and not long after we found ourselves on the bay, threading the channel for the Eastern Shore. The enemy were approaching Mobile by land and water. That was the occasion of our move. I remember we had a grand review in the streets of Mobile. Every one who could carry a gun was in the ranks. The artillerists were armed as infantry. I suppose there were 10,000 men under arms. The great majority of these were "odds and ends," fragments of other commands, boy militia, etc.; a few were veteran troops. Our commander was Dabney H. Maury, "every inch a soldier," but then there were not many inches of him. The soldiers called him "puss in boots," because half of his diminutive person seemed lost in a pair of the immense cavalry boots of the day. He was a wise and gallant officer. Other reinforcements accompanied us to Spanish Fort. I suppose the garrison, when attacked a few days after, amounted to 2,100 men of all arms. General Randall Gibson, since then United States Senator from Louisiana, was in command. The force at Blakley was about 2,500 men under Gen. St. John Littell.

AT SPANISH FORT.

We found ourselves in a curious little tongue of high land jetting out into the bay in a southwesterly direction. This high land broke off abruptly in bluffs on the western or water side, leaving but a narrow margin of beach, while, on the eastern or

inland side, it sloped off into a marsh, which ran around us and Blakley. Our works were arranged to resist an attack from the interior, and, beginning at the southern and lip end of the "tongue," ran in a semi-circle around the inside rim of the high land, resting at each end on the bay. Or rather, they would have done so on the north as well as south, only the marsh interfered, and we had no time to complete them. This was our weak point, and yet in a sense our strong point. We had no defences in that marsh, yet a dense jungle supplied the defect, so dense that our leaders confided in it greatly and placed only a picket line there. These "works" of ours consisted of three "forts" (of earth), one at each end and one in the center, connected by rifle-pits. The one in the center was assigned to our battery. The whole extent of our line from end to end was about a mile and a half.

WHAT SEEMED TO BE A TRAP.

We felt ourselves to be in a trap as soon as we took in the situation. If Farragut's fleet should pass Forts Gaines and Morgan at the mouth of the bay, all he would have to do would be to sail serenely up in our rear and shell us at his leisure and cut us off from Mobile, while a land force could invest us and starve us into surrender. So prominent was the thought in our minds that I remember my messmate "Tony" B— and I ("Tony" is now a staid merchant and man of family in Louisiana), sat on the parapet one afternoon soon after getting there and planned a way of escape for ourselves. Casting our eye towards the bay we noticed a chain of little, low, marshy islands, hardly above the water, which fringed our shore at a distance of six to eight hundred yards from the land, and stretched northward up towards Blakley. "If the place be taken by assault," we thought, "we might make for one of these and by swimming from one to the other, finally get to Blakely." Little did we dream that the whole command was eventually to escape from under the very clutches of the enemy by means of one of those very islands.

ADDING STRENGTH TO THE PLACE.

Several days elapsed before the enemy made his appearance. The time was spent in "planting" torpedoes all through the woody marsh in front of us, in strengthening our works and in making great "bomb-proofs" right behind our works for our wounded, our ammunition and so on. These bomb-proofs were made, some of them, on a vast scale. One I worked upon was about 16x20 feet in dimensions and 10 to 12 feet deep. We cut down great trees, rolled the trunks over the mouth, then put a layer of brush and dirt; then came another layer of heavy logs crosswise, then a layer of brush and dirt, until the roof was six to eight feet thick.

At last the enemy were in sight. Farragut's fleet appeared first. How gallantly ship after ship came up the bay and how we watched them! But suddenly the foremost was hid in a dense cloud of smoke and water. When she came to view again her bow was up in the air and she was evidently sinking. From where we were we could hear no report, but we knew that she had struck one of our torpedoes. The channel was full of them. This was why our leaders left us so exposed, apparently, in our rear. This stopped the advance for the time on the water side. But soon the pop, pop of our pickets' guns drew out attention to our immediate front; the firing grew into volleys, our men came into view through the woods, slowly falling back and finally retiring to the line already marked for them as their permanent fighting posts, the blue waves of the Federal forces circled around us and by nightfall we were invested.

INVESTED.

I think it was about the 22d or 23d of March, '65. I know we were invested seventeen days and made our escape about the 9th of April. Those seventeen days were sufficiently thrilling and eventful. Imagine our position and you can readily believe me. A force reported to be 30,000 strong, under General Steele in front, massed and crowded around our little semi-circle line, their artillery packed thick along the works they were al-

ready throwing up and the ships now drawn within easy range in our rear. The shells from one end of their line could reach the other end of ours, and "raked us fore and aft," while the guns of the fleet could send their shells plump into our backs. Every day was full of incident, and it soon got so that we had no rest day nor night. The picket fights waxed hotter and hotter. Each side had little detached pits, facing each other, with squads of four or five men in each, and constant was the effort of the one side to surprise and capture the other. We had two little "cohorn mortars" in our battery (about fifteen inches long), and Corporal Charlie Fox, especially, became so expert with them that he emptied the pits of the enemy repeatedly with his shell.

SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENT.

The "boy militia" referred to, mere lads many of them, from thirteen to seventeen or eighteen years of age, excited the mingled grief and admiration of us veterans. In vain did we tell them when going to the skirmish line to shelter themselves as much as possible. They thought it was "not soldierly," and they stood up and were shot down like sheep. A spring just inside of our works became a point of thrilling interest. It soon became so that we could not leave our works and run back to the rear to the usual place for water, and it was either use that spring or famish. Yet it was in full sight of the enemy. It occupied a depression in the hillside and was commanded by sharpshooters. There was but one recourse—we must go there by night. Men, strung around with the canteens of their comrades, would steal down to the ravine in the darkness. Sometimes numbers would be gathered there waiting hours for their turn to fill and leave. Alas, that spring became baptized in blood. The enemy had the range and kept up a fire, though they could not see, and many a poor fellow fell at that spring.

DEEDS OF DARING.

Artillery duels became of daily occurrence, our "head logs"

were constantly knocked down upon us, bruising and crippling us; squads of sharpshooters devoted their especial attention to our port holes or embrasures and poured a steady stream of bullets through them from early morn till dewy eve; mining and counter-mining began, and I remember one gallant fellow along the line to the right of us crept one night with a detail of men down the ravine where the spring was, out beyond our skirmish pits, into the lines of the enemy's pickets, and finding the mouth of their mine, which occupied a rather advanced position, he captured the whole batch of miners and got back to our works without a shot or losing a man.

SOME FEDERAL COMPLIMENTS.

But the end came at last. We knew it was coming. We could feel it in the air. And then, too, certain ominous indications came from the enemy. For several days we could see that they were preparing for something unusual. Suddenly one afternoon a most extraordinary fire opened upon us from three points, from the two ends of their line and from their center. It seemed to concentrate upon our battery. No doubt, we had done them mischief, and perhaps more mischief than the other forts, for our gunners had gained experience in a score of battles; but we were not prepared for such an especial compliment as this. They were shelling us with mortar shells, huge fifteen-inch bombs, so large that we could see them with the naked eye shortly after leaving the mortar's mouth; see them as they arose up into the air, describe a graceful curve and then begin hurrying with vicious impetus down full upon our helpless heads.

THE BOMBARDMENT.

They had six of those mortars, two at each point, moved, I suppose, from their ships, and from that time on, both day and night, those fearful things came down upon our heads. There was no shelter from these bombs—no defense from that fire. We had to stand and take it. Their force was terrible. They would go six feet in the solid earth and exploding tear up a

space fifteen or twenty feet square. They went through that tremendous bomb-proof, of which I have spoken, as though it was paper, and we were in constant expectation of losing all of our ammunition and provisions. Those abominable mortars were the last item in their preparations. They practiced on us to get the range, and then we "got it."

TEMPEST OF SHOT.

The last day, the day of assault, came. What a day that was! And yet the enemy's tactics were peculiar. The assault did not come until about 3 P. M. But from dawn until that time, and indeed until night they rained upon us from front and flank and rear and top, from field guns, siege guns, ship guns and mortars; such a tempest of shot and shell as defies description. Think of seventy-five or a hundred guns massed in a semi-circle thick around us; think of those huge mortars belching forth their monstrous contents down upon us; think of the fleet in our rear pouring its fire into our back? Suddenly that storm burst forth, but it ceased not for a moment through all that interminable day. The very air was hot. The din was so great it distracted our senses. We could hardly hear each other speak and could hardly tell what we were doing. The cracking of musketry, the unbroken roaring of artillery, the yelling and shrieking of the shells, the bellowing boom of the mortars, the dense shroud of sulphurous smoke thickening around us—it was thought the mouth of the pit had yawned and the uproar of the damned was about us. And it was not taking away from this infernal picture to see men, as I did, hopping about, "raving, distracted mad," the blood bursting from eyes and ears and mouth, driven stark crazy by concussion or some other cause.

DODGING THE MORTAR SHELLS.

It was utterly idle to try to return that fire. After a few rounds we did not attempt to do so. We stood around sheltering ourselves as best we could. Our works were no longer a protection to us, except against the fire in front. But that we

did not mind. Our thoughts were of the fire from the rear, and above all, of those huge descending bombs. And now occurred a strange scene. We deserted the cover of our works and went out in the space behind them. And there, exposed to the full range of all the rest of that fearful fire, we devoted ourselves entirely to the work of dodging those mortar shells. And they were dodgable.

CAPTAIN OF THE DODGERS.

There was a certain man in the battery gifted with a peculiar, accurate and rapid power of measuring distances with the naked eye. He had found out that by watching the bomb as it left the mortar and after describing the curve began to descend, he could tell pretty near where and when it would strike. His comrades found out this talent, and rallying around him, would run at his signal out of harm's way. And it was funny to see our officers (and a braver set never lived) edging near and in a nonchalant manner, say: "Sing out, S——, and tell us which way to run!" One of those bombs towards the close entered the big bomb-proof of which I have spoken, and exploded. The place was crowded with men who, in spite of warning, sought shelter there. The havoc made I know not, for it was just awhile before we left, but I shudder to think of it.

THE ASSAULT.

Night came at last. Oh, how delicious, how inexpressibly comforting is the coming of night oftentime to the soldier in war. But it gave respite only by bestowing the sweet gift of balmy sleep. The most striking and romantic of all the acts of this drama was now upon us, viz: our escape. The assault, as I have said, came about 3 P. M. But it was a very feeble affair where we were, and was evidently a feint. The main attack was on our left. They penetrated through that dense marshy jungle, which we looked upon as almost impenetrable, and pushing back the feeble picket line we had there, got to the bay between us and Blakely, thus cutting us off. There, as we

afterwards found out, they planted a battery. From that point they came on down our line driving our slender force before them until they got to the fort on our left, which they captured. It was only a few hundred yards from us and we could see them there moving about in the moonlight. Why they did not come right on and take us, too, we could never understand. It was one of those curious blunders which happened so often on both sides during the war.

THE RETREAT.

It was with their dusky outlines in full view, on the fort above us, that we made our preparations to leave and did leave. And now, as to that leaving: Not one of the readers of this article has less notion of what we were going to do, or where we were going than did we, the rank and file, as we received the whispered orders to prepare silently for departure. We were completely bewildered. "Escape! How escape?" We were completely cut off, surrounded; nay, the enemy were in our works, in sight of us. Yet we did escape, and that, too, with scarcely the loss of a man. It was a brilliant moonlight night. About 10 o'clock, after spiking our guns, we left our works and made directly for the beach. Did the enemy see us? They ought to have seen us. Why they did not I cannot tell. We got to the bluff overlooking the bay.

IN A MYSTERIOUS RAVINE.

What next? Behold, the head of the column seemed to melt gradually into the earth, and as we moved up to supply their place we understood their disappearance. The face of the bluff was precipitous, and creased with great fissures or ravines opening out upon the water. The head of our column had disappeared down one of these! Down we followed, pell mell, right down the almost perpendicular sides of the gorge, clinging to vines, saplings, the sides of the rocks; any way to keep our hold, until we reached the bottom, fifty feet or so below. And there, to our amazement, we found the beginning of a treadway,

one or two planks wide. At the word, all shoes and boots were off and we stood in our stocking or naked feet in single line upon that narrow treadway. And then, after orders to keep our guns on the off-side from the enemy, to prevent their glistening being noticed (for artillerists though we were, we still had our infantry accoutrements), and after orders not to whisper a word on pain of being shot, we went forth, literally not knowing whither we were going.

IN THE TREADWAY.

The treadway first debouched upon the beach, then turning to the right it went up the shore for quite a distance; just how far I cannot say, but I know we passed so close to the enemy's pickets stationed in the marsh that we could hear them talking, and right under the nose of their battery. Finally the treadway turned and struck out into the bay. The water was shallow and we walked just above the water's surface. Suddenly a shot came, it was from that battery. Imagine our consternation. But it was not repeated for some time. It was evident they did not see us, but were merely firing "periodically" across what they supposed to be the channel, in order to prevent any succor reaching us. The very last thing they were thinking of was our attempting to escape.

FLOUNDERING IN THE MUD.

We came to the end of that treadway at last. It ended on one of those very marshes by which my comrade "Tony" and I had planned to escape. A chain of them, as I had said, ran up the bay some six or eight hundred yards from the shore. The channel was outside of them, and when we jumped off the treadway on to the island where it terminated, there, out in the water, were the dusky forms of several gunboats waiting to carry us away. But would I ever forget those few minutes on that island? When I jumped from the treadway I sank to my waist in mud. It was a bog. Every one sank more or less deep. But our situation gave us frantic energy. There we were right under the

guns of that battery, helplessly floundering up to our middle in mud. Suppose they discovered us, and there! Forth from the shore came a confused uproar of noise—the shouts of baffled men, volleys of musketry, the deep boom of cannon. They have discovered our flight, back in our works; they have found us out. But not that battery. Periodically its shot goes down the bay, but not towards us. It is still in blissful ignorance and we are still safe.

SAFE AT LAST.

But we must be quick. Our first aim is to struggle up the island, as much out of the range of those guns as possible. All order vanishes; it is no wonder, situated as we were. Tony B—— and I had stuck together throughout. Looking out on the water we saw a yawl pulled cautiously to the shore. We looked around—no one was nigh, as we thought, no fear of swamping her. In we plunged, rushing up to our necks in water, and throwing our guns in first, pitched into the boat, head over heels, laughing, spluttering, struggling. When we had got upright the boat was full to sinking and we thought we were the only ones near it. We were soon on board of one of the gunboats, and in so incredibly short time that the whole command was off that island and sailing jubilantly up the bay. Then that battery found us out, and before we left, sent some right well aimed shots through our rigging. I remember I had curled down on deck near the boiler, for I was wringing wet, and as those shots came viciously near, the thought came, “what a shame to be sunk in this boat after what we have gone through this day.” But we were not sunk. We steamed up the bay, touched at Blakely for awhile (it was stormed an hour or so after we left), went across to Mobile and in a few days evacuated the place with the rest of the troops there and surrendered shortly after at Meridian, Miss.

Secretary Staunton (page 31, of his report for '65) states that there were actually mustered into service of United States, from the 15th of April, '61, to the 14th of April, '65, 2,656,553 men. Mr. Staunton, who had free access to the Confederate

archives several years ago, states that 600,000 men in all, were put into the Confederate service during the same period, and this estimate is very nearly correct. So that the official figures show that the United States had in service more than four times as many men as the Confederacy had.

The disparity in numbers was well illustrated in the last battle of the war; 4,600 of us at Spanish Fort and Blakley fought and kept back 38,000 of the enemy 17 days, with Farragut's fleet in our rear.