CIVIL WAR MARINES: Four Frustrating Years

Story by Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret) · Art courtesy of Marine Corps Art Collection, National Museum of the Marine Corps

Part II, Conclusion

The Civil War entered its third year in 1864, reaping a harvest of death and devastation across the South. Yet Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston still seemed invincible defending their home ground in Virginia and Georgia.

At sea, Confederate raiders like CSS *Alabama* preyed on U.S. commerce in both oceans. Along the coast the Union Navy seemed unable to seize Charleston, S.C., Wilmington, N.C., or Mobile, Ala., key ports that continued to beat the blockade.

Amid considerable public unease, the first wartime election since 1812 drew near. Abraham Lincoln, the Republican incumbent, faced General George B. McClellan, a Democrat, who was running on a platform of war dissatisfaction.

Lincoln's field commanders won critical victories during the summer, which enhanced his re-election campaign. Ulysses S. Grant fought Lee tooth and nail, fi-

Marines earned praise as they served USS *Hartford*'s heavy guns and also provided musket support in Farragut's August 1864 Mobile Bay attack. "An August Morning With Farragut" by William H. Overend recorded the action.

nally boxing him in around Petersburg, Va. In Georgia, William T. Sherman prevailed over Johnston and his successor, John B. Hood, capturing Atlanta and advancing east toward the ocean. At sea off Cherbourg, France, USS *Kearsarge* sank the mighty *Alabama*. Rear Admiral David Farragut stormed into Mobile Bay.

For the first time, U.S. military men were allowed to vote in a presidential election. Seventy percent voted for Lincoln, who won by a landslide, carrying 22 states to McClellan's three. The war would continue.

Marines played a role in sinking CSS *Alabama* and helping RADM Farragut seize Mobile Bay. Most served as seagoing detachments on board ships of the Atlantic and Gulf blockading squadrons. Others endured endless months searching the high seas for Confederate commerce raiders. Several hundred crowded on board the small armored gunboats of the Mississippi River squadrons. Noncommissioned officers commanded more than half of all ships' guards.

Commandant Zeilin was strongest in soliciting public endorsements from the fleet to defeat congressional attempts to abolish the Corps. Declared RADM Farragut, "I have always deemed the Marine guard one of the great essentials of a man-of-war."

The Navy's demand for disciplined, well-armed Marines never diminished. On one stretch of the Mississippi River, when the Commandant simply could not provide sufficient Marines for a landing force, the U.S. Army created an amphibious brigade of combined arms that appeared to steal the leathernecks' thunder. Yet quality still mattered to the Navy. RADM David D. Porter complained from the Western rivers in 1864, "I wish anyone could see the difference between the Marines out here and the people they call soldiers."

Tools of the Trade

Marines in the Civil War fought with firearms and edged weapons procured from the Army and Navy. Most Marines wielded the M1861 Springfield .58-caliber, rifled musket, a reliable, mass-produced weapon that featured a rifled bore, interchangeable parts and flip-up sights calibrated for ranges of 300 or 500 yards. The Springfield's 21-inch triangular socket bayonet proved handy during close combat, although troops in bivouac more commonly stuck it in the ground, jammed a candle stub in its socket and used it as a field reading light.

Some seagoing Marines preferred the .52-cal. Sharps breech-loading rifle, often coating the barrel with tin to reduce saltwater corrosion. Most Marine officers carried the sturdy Model 1851 .36-cal. Navy Colt revolver.

Marine officers gave up their traditional Mameluke swords before the Civil War and—along with the NCOs—adopted the sturdier M1859 Army saber. When the officers reverted back to their Mamelukes in 1875, the NCOs claimed the Army sword for their exclusive use. Both swords remain in service use today.

Some Marines in combat loaded their muskets with "buck and ball," a combination of a full-sized *minié* ball and three buckshot, thereby maximizing lethality at short ranges. The practice dated from the Revolutionary War. RADM John Dahlgren, who had specialized in ordnance before commanding the South Atlantic Squadron, prescribed buck and ball loads for the assaults on Forts Wagner and Sumter in South Carolina.

A New Commandant

Colonel Commandant John Harris died in office on 12 May 1864. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, worried about selecting a replacement, attended his funeral. Welles wanted to avoid the longstanding seniority rule, which would have awarded the position to Col William Dulany, currently facing a court-martial for misbehavior.

"The higher class of Marine officers are not the men who can elevate or give efficiency to the Corps," Welles noted in his diary. After pondering the succession for a month, Welles decided to pass over Dulany and two other senior officers to select Major Jacob Zeilin as the seventh Commandant of the Corps.

Philadelphia native Jacob Zeilin, 58, had been a Marine officer for 33 years, including 14 years at sea. Trained initially at West Point and appointed to the Corps by President Andrew Jackson, Zeilin had served with distinction with the Navy in California and Japan and had volunteered as a company commander at Manassas (Va.). Younger, brighter and more politically connected than Harris, Zeilin still faced the same grinding problems of too many commitments, too few men, and a crippling desertion rate. He found little time or incentive to develop a more meaningful mission for his Marines.

Commandant Zeilin was strongest in soliciting public endorsements from the fleet to defeat congressional attempts to abolish the Corps. Ringing commendations came in from every flagship. Declared RADM Farragut, "I have always deemed the Marine guard one of the great essentials of a man-of-war." RADM Samuel F. Du Pont, who would later blame the Marines for Fort Fisher, N.C., stated in 1864, "A ship without Marines is no ship of war at all."

Admirals Dahlgren, Porter and Andrew Foote also testified favorably. Such endorsements tipped the balance in favor of preserving the Corps. Notably, the flag

The hasty assembly of Marines and sailors from a dozen different ships took heavy casualties in the ill-advised charge, lost heart and cohesion, and fled in disorder.

officers said nothing of Commandants or barracks commanders. Their praise targeted a small institution that somehow continued to generate junior officers and NCOs of proven fortitude and fidelity for service with the fleet—in effect, shipmates.

Fighting in Close Quarters

RADM Farragut braved Confederate mines ("torpedoes"), forts and an enormous ironclad ram to shoulder his fleet into the heart of Mobile Bay in August 1864. When his flagship *Hartford* hesitated at the awful sight of the ship ahead being blown up by a mine, Farragut bellowed, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" The Confederate ram *Tennessee* lurched into *Hartford,* and the great guns of the two ships met muzzle to muzzle.

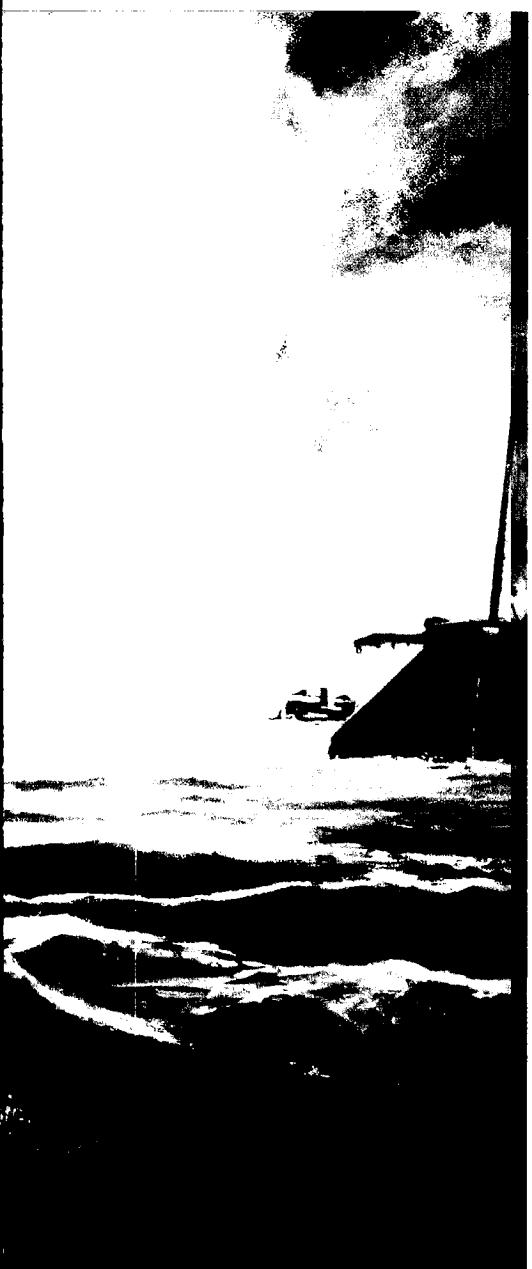
Marine Captain Charles Heywood, the future Commandant who had been on the losing end of the pointblank encounter between USS *Cumberland* and the Confederate ironclad *Virginia* two years earlier, urged his two gun crews into a frenzy of firing and reloading. Other Marines exchanged pistol and rifle fire—even bayonet thrusts—with Confederate Marines through the exposed gun ports.

Every ship in Farragut's flotilla engaged *Tennessee*. Marine Corporal Miles M. Oviatt, a 23-year-old gun captain in USS *Brooklyn*, reported his frustration in firing at the ironclad: "We gave her a broad-

side. But they [the shells] might as well been left in the guns for the effect they did." Later, *Brooklyn*'s gunners shot away the ram's smokestack and her rudder chain, bringing her to bay.

Confederate Surgeon Daniel B. Conrad served in *Tennessee*. Before the war he had been a surgeon in the Union Navy and knew many of the U.S. Marines, some of whom he encountered on Henry House Hill at the first Battle of Manassas while assigned to the Stonewall Brigade. On board *Tennessee*, Conrad described the incredible, short-range cannonading between the Confederate ram and the Union ships *Hartford* and *Lackawanna*. "The noise was one continuous, deafening roar," he wrote, adding, "How close the fighting was, when men could kill or wound each other through the portholes of each vessel."

United States Marines served in 13 of RADM Farragut's warships at Mobile Bay; Marine NCOs commanded 10 of these detachments. Eight Marine NCOs were awarded the Medal of Honor in the battle, including Cpl Oviatt, whose citation reads, "As enemy fire raked the deck, Corporal Oviatt fought his gun with skill and courage throughout the furious two-hour battle." Archibald Henderson's earlier initiative to assign unprecedented responsibility and accountability to Marine NCOs in the 1850s continued to earn the gratitude of Navy commanders a decade later.



"Fort Fisher" by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) accurately depicts the uniforms, equipment and boats used by Marines in the mid-January 1865 assault on Ft. Fisher, N.C.

Embarrassment at Ft. Fisher

The Battle of Ft. Fisher on 15 Jan. 1865 was a significant victory for the Union Army, whose troops captured "the Gibraltar of the South" and closed down Wilmington, the last rebel port on the Atlantic. RADM Porter's fleet contributed the greatest coastal bombardment of the war. Unfortunately for the sea services, the victory was spoiled by the conspicuous failure of a "boarding party" of 2,000 sailors and Marines who assailed the fort with small arms and cutlasses before the main assault by the U.S. Army.

"At a quarter of three an attack was made," said Marine Sergeant Richard Binder, a survivor who had earned the Medal of Honor, "the result being a disastrous defeat of our forces." The hasty assembly of Marines and sailors from a dozen different ships took heavy casualties in the ill-advised charge, lost heart and cohesion, and fled in disorder. "Sheer, murderous madness," exclaimed Navy Lieutenant George Dewey, observing the disaster from USS *Colorado*.

RADM Porter was mortified, having bragged in advance that his brigade of "webfoots" would take the fort and show up the Army. He was quick to blame the Marines, who lacked a field grade officer to point out the utter futility of the plan to begin with. The stigma persisted for years, as did the belief that heavily defended positions should not be assaulted from the sea.

In retrospect, the assault on Ft. Fisher exhibited many of the aspects of modern amphibious warfare. Had the Navy and Marines analyzed the Ft. Fisher assault as thoroughly as they did the doomed Allied landings at Gallipoli, 50 years later, they might have discovered the need for unity of command, concurrent and parallel planning, rehearsal landings, closely integrated naval gunfire support, and the availability of trained amphibious landing forces assigned to the fleet.

This watercolor on paper, titled "Landing at Fort Fisher, N.C.," was painted by artist Fanny Palmer from a description of the 15 Jan. 1865 assault on the last Rebel bastion on the Atlantic. This sketch was developed into a lithograph that was published in 1865.

The Lost Opportunity

One frustrated company-grade officer who suffered through the Ft. Fisher assault later commented, "The War was our great opportunity, and we owlishly neglected it." With the wisdom of hindsight, it is conceivable the Marines could have led the way toward a more meaningful naval mission from the war's beginning.

The initiative would have required a more enlightened and persuasive Commandant than John Harris, but some spokesman might have been found to propose to the Secretary of the Navy and the fleet commanders that the Marines establish a permanent, 1,000-man, expeditionary assault regiment for full-time service with the fleet, commanded by a Marine lieutenant colonel, who would double as the fleet Marine officer.

Unlike the unity-of-command conflicts the Navy and Army experienced throughout the war, the Marine assault regiment remained responsive to the fleet commander's authority. The regiment's primary mission would be to seize and hold an advanced lodgment against hostile beachfront or riverbank positions in order to facilitate the follow-on landing of Army troops.

The Marine regiment would embark aboard seaworthy transports capable of launching surfboats rowed by sailors, or towed by steam tugs. The regiment would train with the fleet in coordinating naval gunfire with the ship-to-shore assault. The fleet would provide boat howitzers, gunners and signalmen. The Marines might create a company of sharpshooters, armed and trained similar to COL Hiram Berdan's outfit in the Union Army. The regiment might include an engineer platoon to build beach defenses and howitzer positions, as well as a primitive shore party/beachmaster group to help follow-on Army units land and continue the attack.

The concept of a light, amphibious "spearhead" would not manifest itself until the early days of World War II.

The concept of a light, amphibious "spearhead" would not manifest itself until the early days of World War II, with Edson's Raiders leading the way into Tulagi, the 7th Army Division's Scouts landing in the Aleutians before the main assault, or First Lieutenant Deane Hawkins' scout snipers landing ahead of Wave 1 at Tarawa. A similar concept for such trained, ready and useful Marines might have worked in the Civil War.

Facing a war characterized by littoral and riverine operations, the Marines missed an early opportunity to establish themselves as the nation's premier landing force. Lacking this breakthrough innovation, the Civil War Marines did their best in traditional roles—gun captains and marksmen in ship battles and, when ordered, attacking Confederate forts from the sea with their bayonets.

Editor's note: To learn more about Civil War Marines, Leatherneck *recommends David M. Sullivan's four-volume series, "The United States Marine Corps in the Civil War," available from MCA bookstores or online at www.mca-marines.org.*

Col Alexander, a noted military historian, served 29 years on active duty, including two tours in Vietnam. He has published several books, including "The Battle History of the Marine Corps," "Utmost Savagery," "Storm Landings" and "Edson's Raiders," and has appeared in 26 documentaries for the History Channel, A&E Network, Fox News Channel and PBS-TV. As co-author with the late BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret), he currently is completing a history of the U.S. Marines in World War I to be released by Naval Institute Press in 2008.