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UNION JOINT OPERATIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA DURING THE CIVIL WAR

by

Quinn G. Hollomon, GS-15, DOD

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Advisor: Dr. Howard M. Hensel

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Preface

If the principles of joint warfare are to be judged sound and proved useful to military planners and operators, then they should be applicable to all wars, not just modern-day conflicts. Today, unlike the experiences of our Civil War predecessors, joint actions are practiced and routine. We have many principles and guidelines to aid us and doctrine is readily available. They have been implemented and validated in recent operations such as Haiti, Kuwait, and Rwanda. However, Union commanders of the 1860's had no idea that these concepts even existed. Nevertheless, intuitively, some of the principles should have been imbedded in the minds of these officers as they conducted joint operations. Could I apply the principles to a Civil War campaign and ascertain if a commander's adherence to or deviance from them had any effect on the conflict's outcome? Would they be as valid almost 140 years ago as they are today and could lessons be learned that would aid the modern warfighter?

To test this hypothesis, I decided to review some of the challenges encountered by joint operators of the Civil War. Although many examples were available, I wanted to use Union joint amphibious operations along the coast of North Carolina. Why did I pick this area to study? Although I grew up in Washington, D.C., my families' roots were in eastern North Carolina. My father was from Aulander, a little town in Bertie County, about an hour or two from the Outer Banks and Cape Hatteras. My mother was from near Tabor City about an hour from Wilmington. As a teenager, I had spent summers

swimming at the Outer Banks as well as sailing on the Neuse River across from the Marine Base at Cherry Point (the site of the battle of New Bern). General histories of the Civil War seldom mention this area in detail. I was interested in learning more and therefore was surprised when my preliminary research showed how many actions actually occurred in this region. If certain events and personalities had changed only slightly, eastern North Carolina might well have been a major theater in the war.

To guide me in this search, I turned to *Joint Pub 1: Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States* to find out what principles are currently adopted by our military. Ten fundamentals important to the successful execution of joint warfare are listed. It is these principles that I have used to evaluate each campaign. Not every principle will always be covered as their use varies widely over the course of the joint operations studied. The fundamentals are:

- Unity of Effort
- Concentration of Military Power
- Seizing and Maintaining the Initiative
- Agility
- Operations Extended to Fullest Breadth
- Maintaining Freedom of Action
- Sustaining Operations
- Clarity of Expression
- Knowledge of Self
- Knowledge of the Enemy[1]

Notes

[1] *Joint Pub 1: Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995), viii.

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Abstract

During the Civil War some of the earliest examples of joint operations in American Military history were undertaken. Except for General Scott's landing at Veracruz during the War with Mexico, joint undertakings in the form of amphibious operations were rare. Army and navy commanders had little experience dealing with the problems associated with the ideas of jointness. Doctrinal guidance was unavailable and commanders worked together often with mixed results. In eastern North Carolina, the Union attempted several joint operations during the course of the war. Attacks were crudely planned and executed by modern standards. The North appeared not to have drawn lessons from preceding campaigns in any systematic way. Nevertheless, a basic pattern did develop and was improved upon over time as seen by the progressive sophistication of the operations against Hatteras, New Bern, and Fort Fisher. Today, the United States military has certain fundamental principles of joint warfare that it employs. When they are applied to Civil War campaigns certain trends become evident. The success rate increased when careful planning and preparation were present and the modern principles of joint warfare were followed. Where these elements were missing, Union forces often met with defeat. Failure to anticipate and provide for contingencies doomed many Civil War campaigns and would do the same to modern-day joint operations. The principles of joint warfare are a tool; one designed to make the transition to fighting as a team easier. Using them does not guarantee the warfighter success, but can greatly improves his chances.

Chapter 1

Introduction

> *Our conjunct expeditions go forth freighted with good wishes, blessings and huzzas. These they soon disburthen and have too often come home loaded with reproaches, sorrow, and disappointment.*
>
> Thomas More Molyneux

During the Civil War some of the earliest examples of joint operations in American military history were undertaken. Except for General Scott's landing at Veracruz during the War with Mexico, joint undertakings in the form of amphibious operations were rare before 1861. Army and navy commanders had little experience dealing with the problems associated with the ideas of jointness. Although on occasion it was thought expedient for the army to call on the navy for help and vice versa, both services saw their roles as totally separate. Coordination was neither required nor often desired.[1]

The Military Academy at West Point contributed little to the subject. The curriculum contained only a few classroom hours on the topic of strategy. Carl von Clausewitz's famous analysis of the nature of violence between states, *On War*, was not yet available in the United States. Graduates had only a one hundred page selection drawn from the Swiss strategist, Baron Antoine Henri Jomini's book, *Traite des Grandes Operations Militaires* (Paris, 1811). Doctrinal guidance was therefore unavailable and commanders worked together often with mixed results.[2]

Union Military Strategy

President Lincoln had proclaimed the blockade of Confederate ports in April 1861. General Winfield Scott, who had commanded the land forces during the War with Mexico some fifteen years earlier, was General-in-Chief of the Union forces in 1861 and had proposed the idea. Realizing that the war was likely to be long, Scott had rejected the idea of invading the South. He estimated that this would require at least 300,000 men, be extremely costly, and embitter the South for generations. General Scott's idea (nicknamed the Anaconda Plan) was to strangle the South with a naval blockade to deplete the Confederacy of its war making resources.

The blockade element would be combined with an effort to sever internal Confederate communications by occupying the Mississippi Valley. An army would be raised to seal off the Border States and protect Washington, D.C., but this was essentially an army of observation and was never intended to go on the offensive. The Anaconda Plan was never formally adopted. President Lincoln and subsequent Generals-in-Chief would modify and change this plan substantially; however, the blockade element remained active throughout the Civil War. As long as Confederate ports remained open, supplies would continue to reach the people and fielded armies of the South.[3]

The Union Navy

When the war began, the Northern navy was unprepared to carry out the blockade. There were ninety vessels of which only forty-two were ready for sea. It was a deep-water navy, unsuited and ill trained for the shallow-water inland and coastal tasks it was asked to perform in the Civil War. The force had only limited employment in this type of operation during the Mexican War when it was called upon to transport troops,

blockade ports, and bombard shore batteries while facilitating the landing of army troops ashore. Nevertheless, the Union navy began to grow rapidly as its ships commenced blockading duty at Southern ports. The North went on a buying and building frenzy to equip new vessels. By the fourth of July 1861, the navy had eighty-two commissioned ships with more on the way.[4]

Part of this success can be attributed to the sound administration of the navy during the war years. In June 1861, Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, had created a blockade strategy board consisting of members of the army, navy, and coastal survey to study the conduct of the blockade and suggest ways to improve its efficiency.[5] The board realized that the South was vulnerable in that it possessed only a few useful ports. "For the Northern blockade to produce effective results only ten seaports which possessed rail or water connections with the interior needed to be closed: Norfolk, Virginia; New Bern and Wilmington, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Jacksonville, Fernandina, and Pensacola, Florida; Mobile, Alabama; and New Orleans, Louisiana."[6] The board set a general guide for all blockading operations, which generally was followed by the navy during the war.[7]

Notes

[1] Rowena Reed, *Combined Operations in the Civil War* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 4-5.

[2] Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 12.

[3] Howard M. Hensel, *The Sword of the Union: Federal Objectives and Strategies During the American Civil War* (Montgomery, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1989), 8; Reed, 5.

[4] Bern Anderson, *By Sea and By River: The Naval History of the Civil War* (1962; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 10; K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 106-11, 232-36; Hattaway, 33.

Notes

[5] Hattaway, 135; Charles M. Robinson, III, *Hurricane of Fire: The Union Assault on Fort Fisher* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 12.

[6] Hattaway, 127.

[7] Robert M. Browning, Jr., *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 8-9.

Chapter 2

The Birth of Joint Action

> *"The obstruction on the North Carolina coast…should be thoroughly attended to."*
>
> Gideon Welles

By the summer of 1861, the North was in need of a victory. In July, Southern forces had soundly defeated the Union general, McDowell, at the First Battle of Manassas. General Scott had not envisioned an attack in Virginia. The capital would be securely held and the war would be decided elsewhere. However, Scott's essentially passive Anaconda Plan had begun to undergo a metamorphosis. The plan was unlikely to bring about the defeat of the South in a politically acceptable time frame. Other measures would need to be taken. Scott had failed to take into consideration that a Confederate army on the outskirts of Washington just could not be ignored.[1]

The Hatteras Inlet Campaign

In the wake of Manassas, the board and Welles turned their attention to Hatteras Inlet on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The strategic importance of the inlet was well understood by the navy. This inlet, along with several others, allowed access to North Carolina's immense array of sounds: Currituck, Albemarle, Pamlico, Core, and Bogue. Varying in width from one to forty miles, they provided ready access to the coastal plain.

In addition, these North Carolina sounds were connected to Virginia waters by means of a system of canals. Whoever controlled these sounds and the navigable rivers flowing into them controlled the eastern one third of the state, the main rail line from Wilmington which connected Richmond with the rest of the South, and the "backdoor" to Norfolk and tidewater Virginia.[2]

However, the immediate naval concern was the "Mosquito Fleet," the nickname of the North Carolina navy. The state had bought five small steamers, armed them, and sent them to the sound with the orders to seize enemy shipping as it moved along the coast. Hatteras Inlet was being used as a base for these operations. The Confederate raiders were causing Washington problems with the northern merchants whose insurance underwriters were demanding that Welles take action. The board recommended the closing of the inlet and the navy called upon the army for help in overcoming the Confederate defenses.[3]

Major General Benjamin F. Butler, a political general from Massachusetts, and Commodore Silas H. Stringham, commanding the Atlantic Blockading Squadron, were placed in charge of the expedition. The Federal move against Hatteras Inlet would be the first joint operation of the war. The army, loaded on two transports, had 880 men and was supplied with ten days rations. They were given no amphibious training and no advanced planning so that they could effect an orderly landing. General Butler had begun a pattern in joint operations that would prove his undoing before the war was over.[4]

Two forts defended Hatteras Inlet. Both were made of sand, sheathed by wood planks and covered by sod. The largest, Fort Hatteras, was one eighth mile from the inlet

and commanded the channel with twelve short range, 32-pounder smooth bore cannon. Fort Clark was east of Fort Hatteras and nearer the ocean. Five 32-pounders provided crossfire against the channel. Colonel William F. Martin commanded the two forts. To defend the installations he had only 420 men (increased to 650 men during the fighting when reinforced by Commodore Samuel Barron). In fact, there were only six regiments in North Carolina to defend the entire 400-mile coast; the rest of the troops were in Virginia. The forts had been hastily constructed and were poorly designed as well as being undermanned and short on ammunition.[5]

The Union fleet with seven ships and 143 guns began its bombardment of Fort Clark on the morning of August 28th.[6] The plan was simple. While the navy fired at the forts, General Butler would disembark his troops three miles down the beach and prepare for an assault if the shelling by the warships had no success in driving them out. But like most plans, the difficulty was in carrying them out. While the trip down the coast had been made in good weather, strong winds had created rough surf by the time the landing was effected. Butler succeeded in getting only 318 men ashore by nightfall with few supplies and little armament. The men were wet and disorganized, without provision and potable water and their ammunition was damp. Only the guns of the fleet protected them.[7]

The heavy bombardment by the fleet succeeded in driving the Confederate forces out of Fort Clark and into Fort Hatteras. The Union gunners out ranged the Confederates. Fort Hatteras was too distant and held its fire. Fort Clark expended its ammunition on a futile effort to hit the Federal force with its short-range guns.[8]

The next day, the Union fleet bombarded Fort Hatteras for over three hours. The shells were now "falling in and around the battery with great effect."[9] Commodore Barron (who had taken over command from an exhausted Martin), was unable to reach the Union fleet with the fort's guns and fearful of greater loss of life, agreed to unconditional surrender to General Butler.[10]

The taking of Hatteras was significant because it was the first action in the Civil War that demonstrated the vulnerability of fortifications. This was the only means the South had of defending its seacoast. Throughout the war, the Confederacy never had the capacity to produce a substantial navy. If Hatteras could be taken by naval gunfire then, so could other fortifications along the southern coast.[11]

The Application of the Principles of Joint Warfare

From the perspective of a joint military operation, the expedition against Hatteras could not be considered a success. The army was unable to successfully land on the beach due to the foul weather and inexperience in landing ashore. Landing on an open beach with less than half their men and few of their officers, the army had become more of a liability to the fleet than an asset. The Union's plan for placing the men ashore was totally lacking in foresight and planning, despite the fact that the waters around Cape Hatteras were notorious for being choppy and changeable. General Butler was unable to concentrate his military force or combat power against the enemy. Instead he was forced to wait for events to develop and was unable to seize the initiative. Through poor planning and amateurish execution he forfeited his offensive capacity to use the versatility of joint forces to confuse, demoralize, and defeat the enemy. Indeed, had the Confederates in the fort shown initiative, they might have captured the landing party on

the beach during the night of August 28th. The landing party had lost its agility; however, the defenders showed even less and through inaction surrendered an ideal opportunity to achieve a major military advantage.

Despite being nominally a joint operation, the success of the Hatteras expedition must be attributed to the navy. The Union fleet's accurate fire brought about the surrender of the two forts. What was not appreciated was that these two forts were undermanned, poorly situated and constructed, and outgunned and out ranged. They were indefensible and would have fallen to any well-armed attack by any type of force. The navy, in part, would draw the conclusion from this attack that all shore fortifications could be reduced by naval bombardment alone and that the army's only utility was as an occupation force. This opinion was not universal. Joint operations would still be planned and executed; however, another campaign just to the south of North Carolina was soon to be fought which did nothing to dispel the notion.[12]

The Port Royal Campaign

Since April 1861, the navy had grown extensively and with the resignation of Stringham clearing the way, the Blockade Board had recommended the splitting of the Gulf and Atlantic squadrons. In September, Welles appointed two younger men to command the Atlantic Coast Squadron. Captain Louis M. Goldsborough took charge of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron and Captain Samuel F. Du Pont commanded the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron (both men were soon made flag officers). The dividing line was the North and South Carolina border.[13]

In November 1861, Du Pont had decided to capture Port Royal, South Carolina by means of a joint operation. Fearing that naval bombardment alone would not prevail

against the two forts guarding the entrance to Port Royal harbor, Du Pont, unlike Butler, went prepared for almost any eventuality. Using the government records from the Mexican War, he even had researched the correct type of landing craft to use and repeatedly drilled his crews and the army until he felt they were prepared to properly execute an amphibious landing.[14] However, fate intervened and gale-force winds and driving rain and fog scattered the fleet as it approached Port Royal. When the weather cleared and the squadron was reformed, the army had lost most of its landing craft and ammunition.[15] No joint operation was possible. Despite misgivings, but because of inadequate preparations by the Southern defenders, Du Pont was able to secure the harbor on November 7th with naval bombardment alone.[16]

Du Pont would not have willingly chosen this mode of attack; nevertheless, like Hatteras, the fall of the two forts was entirely the result of naval gunfire. The Union navy would later realize that a well-built and defended fort could withstand a naval bombardment and that shoals, mines, and obstructions could prevent naval forces from running past the forts. However, the effects of these two early successes and the navy's rivalry with the army for credit or blame after each combined operation would delay consistent and effective use of the Union's superior joint mobility and firepower until near the end of the war.

Notes

[1] Hattaway, 35, 92; Reed, 10.

[2] John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 31-32.

[3] Barrett, 35-36; Howard P. Nash, Jr., *A Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1972), 50-51; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1927), ser. 1, vol. 6: 69-72, 76, 78-80, 110-11 (hereafter cited as ORN).

Notes

[4] Rush C. Hawkins, "Early Coast Operations in North Carolina," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: The Century Co., 1888), 1:632-33; ORN, vol. 6:112; Reed, 11.

[5] Barrett, 33, 37; Browning, 12-14; Reed, 12.

[6] Barrett, 37.

[7] Barrett, 39-40; Hawkins, 633; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 4, pt. 1: 582, 589 (hereafter cites as ORA).

[8] Barrett, 41; Browning, 13; Reed, 13.

[9] ORN, ser. 1, vol. 6:121-22.

[10] Barrett, 43-45; Browning, 14; Nash, 53.

[11] Nash, 54.

[12] Anderson, 49-51; Reed, 14-15.

[13] Browning, 17-18.

[14] Reed, 24.

[15] Ibid., 28.

[16] Anderson, 56.

Chapter 3

The Burnside Expedition

> *Wherever his fleet can be brought, no opposition to his landing can be made except within range of our fixed batteries. We have nothing to oppose its heavy guns which sweep over the low banks of this country with irresistible force.*
>
> Robert E. Lee

On November 1, 1861, the aged General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott, retired and Major General George B. McClellan was named as his replacement. President Lincoln and General McClellan, although changing other components of the national military strategy (the necessity to seize certain specific geographic regions in the South was added), reemphasized and strengthened the naval blockade.[1] "Since several Southern port cities were obviously of considerable importance to the South and, hence, their capture and permanent occupation by Federal forces would constitute a severe blow to the Confederacy, these urban coastal centers became attractive targets for Union amphibious operations."[2] McClellan made plans (not all of which were carried out) to seize several southern ports including Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans.[3] These campaigns were part of McClellan's overall strategy in which the army was to mount simultaneous attacks in Tennessee, the Mississippi valley, and against Richmond, thus placing tremendous pressure on Southern resources.[4]

In support of the Army of the Potomac's attack on Richmond, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, who was to command the operation, and General McClellan devised a plan for a series of landings on the North Carolina coast. The operational objectives were to support McClellan's forces near Richmond by both drawing Confederate troops away from and harassing the lines of communication leading to the city.[5] Know as the Burnside Expedition, the plan was "to organize a division of from 12,000 to 15,000 men, mainly from States bordering on the Northern sea-coast." These men would presumably be accustomed to disembarking from ships. It also provided for a fleet of shallow-draft vessels and barges with which to move the troops rapidly "from point to point on the coast with a view to establishing lodgments on the Southern coast, landing troops, and penetrating into the interior."[6] The Secretary of War was easily won over and Burnside was authorized to raise fifteen regiments and given unlimited funds with which to equip them. Naval approval was also quickly forthcoming since the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron Commander, Rear Admiral Goldsborough, whose fleet would support the expedition, had also put forward to the Secretary of the Navy a less ambitious but similar combined attack by the army and navy.[7] The United States first major amphibious assault force was thus created.

Burnside's initial goal was the seizure of Roanoke Island located between the Outer Banks and the mainland proper. This was considered necessary before any invasion of the mainland could take place since the island commanded the approaches to Albemarle Sound as well as the cities of Plymouth, Elizabeth City, and Edenton. The two-day engagement in February 1862 was a Union success, in part because of Southern

miscalculations. Valuable practice was gained on making a division size amphibious landing.[8]

The New Bern Campaign

After a period of rest, Union forces prepared to attack New Bern. The town of 5,500 was at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent rivers. Possessing a good harbor, New Bern accomplished an active trade by sea and via the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad that connected at Goldsboro with the main line to Richmond.[9] The capture of the town befitted the Union strategy.

While replenishing supplies, Burnside was able to send spies into New Bern and gained valuable information on the Confederate fortifications and manpower, which had recently been strengthened. An attack was planned for March 13th; however, before this occurred, Gustavus Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, recalled Goldsborough to Hampton Roads where the battle between the ironclads, *Monitor* and *Virginia*, was raging. Command of the naval component of the expedition passed to Commander Stephen Rowan.[10]

At New Bern, Confederate Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch had only 4,000 men to defend a set of elaborate defenses which had been planned for a much larger force. Built before he assumed command, Branch "for six weeks engaged in making the necessary changes to contract them."[11] Satisfactory progress was not made due to a lack of tools and labor. What progress that was made occurred on the river defenses, which were not attacked by the Union forces. Feeling his strongest work about ten miles below New Bern might be taken from the rear, Branch decided not to defend the town from there, but instead to make his stand at Fort Thompson, a thirteen-gun sod

installation about six miles from New Bern.[12] The placing of the fort's guns had ten bearing on the sea while only three faced the land approach; the engineers erroneously believed that an attack would come by water. In all, not one of seven defensive works were designed to have large cannon facing the land where the railroad and a country road ran along the Neuse River and at right angles to the entrenchments.[13] In the river opposite Fort Thompson were iron-capped pilings and sunken vessels as well as 30 torpedoes (mines) which presented a formidable barrier.[14]

On the evening of March 12th, Union troop transports carrying three brigades of 11,000 men and fourteen gunboats anchored in the Neuse River off the mouth of Slocum Creek, twelve miles below New Bern.[15] In the morning, with a heavy rain falling, Burnside elected to land his troops. Each soldier carried three days rations, forty rounds of ammunition, and a rubber blanket. The fleet commenced bombardment to prepare the landing site; however, the shelling was unnecessary as no Confederate soldiers were in the immediate vicinity. The landing, similar to the one at Roanoke Island, used a long line of launches towed by steam tugs to reach the beach. As the tugs neared the land, they would release the launches and allowed momentum to carry them forward until aground.[16]

Because of the rain and mud, the troops advanced slowly up the road and rail line towards New Bern. No artillery was taken except for several small howitzers that had to be laboriously dragged by the navy. As the advance progressed, the gunboats proceeded parallel to the marching column and shelled the woods before them. This was one of the first instances of a creeping barrage, used to great effect over fifty years later in France during World War I. The army and navy coordinated the gunfire through the use of

signal rockets that determined the naval gunner's aim point and range. When the Union encountered a Confederate battery, three gunboats moved ahead and silenced the threat, enabling the army to proceed.[17]

On the morning of the 14th, the Union forces reached the main line of Southern defenders. Earthworks interdicted the line of march. The fortification was filled with infantry, cavalry, and artillery. The earthwork extended from the Neuse River at Fort Thompson a mile and a half west to a swamp that anchored the Confederate right.[18] The outnumbered Confederates might have stopped the Union advance here had it not been for the fleet. The overwhelming naval firepower allowed the North to continue the approach. To support the army as close as possible, Rowan instructed the gunboats to fire just ahead of the Union lines: "I commence throwing 5, 10, 15 second shells inshore and notwithstanding the risk, I determined to continue till the general sent me word. I know the persuasive effect of a 9-inch [shell], and thought it better to kill a Union man or two than to lose the effect of my moral suasion."[19]

The gunboats maintained their fire while the army attacked both of the Southern flanks to no avail. However, an opening in the weak Confederate center was finally exploited when engaged Northern units relayed the situation to their commanders. Reinforced Union forces were rushed forward and broke the enemy line near the railroad and captured a brick kiln. Fierce fighting ensued as the Union troops moved through the gap. The Northern right was ordered to make a general advance to take advantage of the situation. With the enemy behind him, Branch had no choice but to order a hasty retreat. To avoid capture, the Confederates fled across the Trent River into New Bern, burning the bridge behind them. By the time the Union troops were able cross the river in boats,

the enemy had fled. During the greater part of the action, the gunboats shelled the woods in the rear of the earthworks.[20]

The Application of the Principles of Joint Warfare

Although circumstances today are quite different from those experienced in the Civil War, many of the key principles of joint military operations were present. Burnside and McClellan had perceived a strategy with the expedition that focused on the significant consequences a success or failure in one campaign can have on another. By going on the offensive in North Carolina, the two generals were bowing to the politics of the situation in the East. Lincoln needed victories to bolster morale and ensure continuing support for the war in the North. The seizure of these port cities furthered this goal as well as enhanced the effectiveness of the blockade. McClellan's main focus was the capture of Richmond, not necessarily the defeat or surrender of Lee's army.[21] If the attacks along the coast could draw some of Lee's forces away from Richmond to defend North Carolina, McClellan's task was made easier. Unity of effort would be achieved at the strategic level.

At the tactical level, both Burnside and Rowan capitalized on the advantages in firepower that the fleet provided. The Union forces lost only 90 men killed and 380 men wounded against a strong fortified position that possessed field artillery.[22] The Union navy was a major factor in reducing casualties and ensuring victory. While unity of command was not formalized, good working relations and excellent communications were maintained. The preparatory naval bombardment, the rolling barrage and the close fire support for the army attack exemplified the concentration of military power at the proper point and time. By taking these and other related actions, Union forces achieved a

decisive advantage and exploited that advantage to win quickly and with as few casualties as possible.

The cooperation between the Union land and sea forces contributed greatly to operational agility. The fleet gave the army an edge by providing mobility that the Confederates could not match.[23] The swiftness with which the Union forces were able to arrive by sea, negated the South's inherent defensive advantage and created a mismatch between what the Confederates anticipated and what actually occurred. At the time of the attack, Branch still lacked progress on the rebuilding of the fortifications to meet the requirements of the forces at his disposal. The effort to prepare the river-facing defenses was largely wasted as it was not useful against a landside attack. In addition, Commander Rowan, without hesitation, took the calculated risk of endangering his own troops to provide extremely close fire support. Under no requirement to do so, Rowan's quick thinking and ability to deviate intelligently from the standard plan effectively leveraged the army's firepower and created a situation that offered the best chance for success.

By extending the campaign to the fullest breadth and depth possible within the sounds of North Carolina, the Burnside Expedition kept Southern forces off-balance and confused as to where the North was to strike next. This was not only important militarily, but psychologically as well. When the Union fleet first appearance in North Carolina waters, the result was the hasty exodus of a large percentage of New Bern's population.[24] The sudden appearance of a division of infantry some 200 miles behind the "front" deeply affected Southern morale and "struck terror and dismay along the whole coast."[25] To reassure the civilian populace, the Confederate government was forced to disperse its

military forces over a broad area in order to defend the 400-mile shoreline, despite the fact that it did not have the manpower to do so. This greatly complicated Confederate planning and virtually guaranteed Northern numerical superiority at a given point and time.

Knowledge of the enemy was also used to great advantage. Burnside integrated his intelligence reports successfully into his operational maneuver plan. Although history does not provide details, the general's spies most certainly provided him with the exact number of troops in Branch's command and how they were posted.[26] By knowing his own forces' capabilities and the disposition of the enemy, Burnside pitted his strengths against the enemy's weakness. The diversity and flexibility of the joint forces at his disposal provided the general with a range of options. By avoiding a sea attack, the Confederates main defense was bypassed. By attacking on land, Burnside used his superior knowledge to exploit the potential of his forces. Due to terrain limitations, Branch had a 150-yard gap in the center of the line.[27] In an effort to plug this potential weakness, poorly trained and equipped militia was used.[28] Once reconnaissance was able to ascertain the location of the gap and militia, the North immediately moved to avoid the enemy strength and to focus its efforts against the enemy weakness. The opening would not have been permanent and the enemy's time of exposure would have been fleeting. The situation demanded flexibility and speed. The Union's main effort on the right flank was adroitly turned into a supporting effort on the center. By funneling his force through rapidly, Burnside seized the initiative and demonstrated that he was not bound to slavishly follow his original plan.

The End of the Burnside Expedition

In late April, Burnside, using mainly land-based forces, went on to capture Fort Macon and the city of Beaufort. The port was used throughout the rest of the war as a Northern logistic base. This was the last major action of the Union expedition. Shortly thereafter, McClellan was fully engaged in the Peninsula Campaign. Knowing reinforcements would not be available, Burnside was forced to be cautious. After Robert E. Lee defeated McClellan in the Seven Days' Battles, most of Burnside's force was recalled, placing the Union forces that remained on the defensive in eastern North Carolina for most of the rest of the war. Without sufficient numbers, the inland offensive was put on hold and the United States first major amphibious assault force became part of history.[29]

A Change in Union Strategy

On July 11, 1862, Lincoln appointed Major General Henry W. Halleck, the western theater commander, as General-in-Chief of the Army. Halleck would hold this post until early 1864.[30] It was not accidental that this was about the same time frame that Union joint operations would become dormant in North Carolina. McClellan had been a proponent of joint operations and had wanted amphibious landings along the coastline. Halleck opposed the many isolated campaigns along the sea and gulf coasts. Being a disciple of Jomini, Halleck believed that one should concentrate the army and attempt to destroy or defeat Lee's army in a decisive battle. Whereas McClellan had seen Richmond as the key to Union victory, Halleck viewed the Mississippi Valley as the theater that should receive first priority.[31] If no major decisive action was contemplated

in Virginia, then North Carolina no longer had the significance it previously had held under McClellan.

By this stage of the war, it was also clear that the Union navy was considered to be subordinate to the Union army and its activities.[32] Welles resented the fact that the navy's accomplishments were barely recognized except for spectacular battles such as New Orleans. During Halleck's tenure as chief, the cooperation needed to field joint operations became increasingly hard to obtain. For example, after Vicksburg, Major General Grant repeatedly proposed a campaign to attack Mobile with the help of the navy. Halleck turned down each request. Little wonder that Welles was determined to plan naval operations such as Charleston without the support of or need for the Union army. Only where he was convinced that land forces were necessary did he aggressively seek army support.[33] For these reasons, it was over two years before another major joint amphibious operation would be undertaken in North Carolina. This time, the North utilized the largest American fleet ever assembled in the Civil War to close the last port still open to the Confederacy.

Notes

[1] Hensel, 47-48.
[2] Ibid., 49.
[3] Ibid., 52.
[4] Barrett, 69.
[5] Robert W. Daly, "Burnside's Amphibious Division," *Marine Corps Gazette* 35, no. 12 (December, 1951): 30; Nash, 73; Capt Richard A. Ward, "An Amphibious Primer: Battle for New Bern," *Marine Corps Gazette* 36, no. 8 (August, 1952): 36.
[6] Barrett, 66; Ambrose E. Burnside, "The Burnside Expedition," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: The Century Co., 1888), 1:660.
[7] Daly, 31.
[8] Daly, 37; Ward, 37.
[9] Ward, 37-38.
[10] Browning, 31-32; Ward 38.

Notes

[11] Hawkins, 651.
[12] Browning, 32; Hawkins, 651.
[13] Barrett, 96; Browning, 32.
[14] Hawkins, 648.
[15] Barrett, 98.
[16] Barrett, 98-99; Ward, 37-38.
[17] Barrett, 99, Browning, 32; Nash, 215; ORN, ser. 1, vol. 7:111-17.
[18] Ward, 40.
[19] Browning, 33; ORN, ser. 1, vol. 7:111-113,117.
[20] Browning, 33; Burnside, 669; Hawkins, 650.
[21] Hensel, 149-50.
[22] Hawkins, 650.
[23] Browning, 37.
[24] Barrett, 98.
[25] Ward, 42.
[26] Barrett, 100.
[27] Daniel W. Barefoot, *General Robert F. Hoke: Lee's Modest Warrior* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair Publisher, 1996), 41.
[28] Barefoot, 43; Hawkins, 651.
[29] Browning, 37-38.
[30] Hensel, 83.
[31] Hattaway, 514, 572-73; Hensel, 120-24.
[32] Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 4 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911), 1:69.
[33] Anderson, 236, 291.

Chapter 4

The Fort Fisher Campaigns

> *Something must be done to close the entrance to Cape Fear River and port of Wilmington…. I have been urging a conjoint attack upon Wilmington for months. Could we seize the forts at the entrance of Cape Fear and close the illicit traffic, it would be almost as important as the capture of Richmond on the fate of the Rebels….*
>
> Gideon Welles

Fort Fisher was located approximately 20 miles south of Wilmington, North Carolina. It was built near the tip of a peninsula less than one mile wide with the Cape Fear River on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. The location was known as Federal Point in the North, but the South called it Confederate Point after the beginning of the Civil War. With the closure of the Port of Mobile by Admiral Farragut, Wilmington was the last major port open to the Confederacy. Part of the reason for this lay in the city's geography. Located well up the Cape Fear River, it could not be shelled by Union warships in the Atlantic Ocean. They would need to enter the river to do so. Before 1761, the Cape Fear River had only one outlet to the sea; however, a hurricane that year created a second inlet with Smith Island and Frying Pan Shoals between the two. A century later, this created a nightmare for Federal warships attempting to blockade the port. With New Inlet to the north protected by Fort Fisher and Old Inlet to the south secured by Fort Caswell, the Union navy had to patrol two entrances to the Cape Fear River. These entrances were only 10 miles apart as the crow flies, but required

50 miles of blockade duty by 30 to 40 Northern vessels to adequately contain Southern blockade-runners. In addition, shallow bars at each inlet prevented larger vessels from firing on the forts at close range.[1]

Colonel William Lamb, the commander of Fort Fisher, had been working on improving the defenses of the fort for since arriving in the summer of 1862. His efforts turned the fortification into the strongest earthen works in the Confederacy know as the "Gibraltar of the South". Shaped like an inverted letter "L", it consisted of two faces. The northern or land face stretched for more than one half mile across the peninsula. The eastern or sea face stretched more than a mile south along the oceanfront. The land face consisted of fifteen earthen mounds (called traverses). The interiors were hollow allowing for protection of the gun crews during naval bombardments. Between the mounds were 20 artillery pieces, three mortars and several field cannon. To the north, the shore was cleared of any obstructions for approximately one half mile to allow for a clear field of fire. An electric minefield, quite an invention for its time, and a log palisade was placed in front of the land face running across Confederate Point. A forty-three feet high bastion was placed at the northeast corner of the fort where the two sides of the "L" come together. Along the sea face, the fort was armed with another twenty-four pieces of heavy artillery. At the south end was located the Mount Battery, over sixty feet tall and armed with two heavy artillery pieces. In all, forty-four of the forts 169 cannon were heavy pieces. Colonel Lamb had built an impressive fort, but like most fortifications in the South, it was short on men. At the time of the first attack only 1,400 soldiers, many of which had never seen combat, defended the fort.[2]

The Navy Department and Welles had been pushing for a joint operation with the army against Wilmington since 1862. In this instance, Welles realized that the navy could not overcome the defenses of the Cape Fear River alone. The War Department, however, feeling it could not spare the troops, remained uninterested. Welles continue to press the issue and, by the fall of 1864, had succeeded in getting President Lincoln's and the Secretary of War Stanton's permission. He still needed the approval of Lieutenant General Grant. In March, Grant was made the General-in-Chief of the Army replacing Halleck. This action removed a major stumbling block to joint operations. Facing Lee at Petersburg, Grant was reluctant to divide his forces, but could see the advantage of controlling Wilmington in order to cut the railines supplying the Southern army.[3]

Meanwhile, the navy was having problems finding a commander to lead the expedition. Grant and Welles both agreed that Admiral Lee, head of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, whose jurisdiction Wilmington lay within was not energetic enough. Admiral Farragut, the first choice, turned it down due to ill health. Finally, after considering others, Welles settled on Rear Admiral David D. Porter to relieve Lee and undertake the expedition.[4]

Grant finally agreed to the proposal on December 6th and sent Major General Butler (now the commander of the Army of the James) 6,500 men under the charge of Major General Weitzel to assist the navy in the taking of Fort Fisher. At the last minute, Butler, whose military department contained Fort Fisher, decided to take personal command of the army forces in the expedition. This proved unfortunate, as the two joint commanders of the expedition were no longer on the best of terms with each other. Bad blood had

come between Butler and Porter during Admiral Farragut's campaign to take New Orleans.[5]

The First Attack on Fort Fisher

The strategy for taking Fort Fisher was unusual. It centered on blowing up an old steamer loaded with explosives near enough to the fort to render the inhabitants incapacitated, after which the army could just walk in and take over. The iron steamer, *Louisiana,* old and decrepit, was selected to carry the gunpowder. Taken to Hampton Roads the ship was camouflaged to look like a blockade-runner and loaded with over 200 tons of gunpowder.[6]

Butler and the troop transports arrived off Cape Fear on December 15; however, Porter was not at the rendezvous site. Unknown to Butler, he was still in Beaufort where he has been delayed loading the rest of the gunpowder on the *Louisiana* and waiting for high tide; he did not arrive for another three days. By the time Porter arrived on the 18th, three days of beautiful weather had been wasted. Secrecy had been so poor in the northern newspapers that the fleet's destination had already been reported in Richmond. Using the extra days, Colonel Lamb had been able to reinforce the fort.[7] With bad weather approaching and the troop transports running low on water and coal, Butler decided to head for Beaufort to wait out the storm, while Porter remained on station. Porter had no intention of waiting for Butler's return before setting off the explosion on the powderboat. Butler sent his aide on a fast steamer to tell Porter that the transports would arrive at the warships location at sunset on the 24th. After receiving the message, Porter still decided to set the explosion for 0100 on Christmas Eve and began the naval bombardment later that morning. Butler believing Porter wanted the entire honor to fall

on the navy and marines for taking Fort Fisher, was furious and hurried back, but he did not arrive in time.[8]

"Although the importance of following the explosion of the powder boat with an immediate attack had been repeatedly stressed, the fleet did not … open fire on the fort until 1120 am, about 10 hours after the boat was blown up."[9] The explosion of the *Louisiana* had been too small and too far from shore to do any damage. Even if it had succeeded, the lack of follow-up would have provided Colonel Lamb with the time to repair damage to the fortifications and take care of the needs of his men.[10]

The bombardment of the fort appeared to be an unequal contest. If the number of rounds fired by the Union warships (approximately 10,000) versus what Fort Fisher fired (672) was any indication then Admiral Porter should have reduced the fort to rubble. However, actual damage to the fort was minor. The Union gunners, used to chasing blockade-runners and not firing on forts, had universally aimed too high and at random. Most of the damage occurred to support building. It created a lot of smoke, but did not reduce the firepower of the fort. Colonel Lamb fired so few shots because he did not want to waste his limited supply of ammunition in case the Union warships decided to make a run by the fort into the Cape Fear River.[11]

Butler and the troop transports returned to the vicinity of Fort Fisher. Through an aide he attempted to have a conference with Porter on the next day's assault, but the admiral, indicating fatigue, refused to see him. He agreed to meet with General Weitzel in the morning. Although Porter still believed the fort was demolished, Weitzel convinced him to continue the shelling and provide covering fire for the landing.[12]

General Weitzel was in command of the landing party. The army commenced landing north of the fort on Christmas day. At first, everything went well, but by 1500 in the afternoon, with 2500 men ashore, operations were suspended due to rising seas. General Weitzel orders were to reconnoiter the fort and ascertain if an assault was practicable. At about 800 yards, he viewed the land face. What the general saw troubled him greatly, as it appeared seventeen guns were operational and the traverses appeared in tact. Information from a group of captured Confederate junior reserves led him to believe that the fort was well defended, when, if fact, it was not. He informed General Butler that an assault would be extremely dangerous and unlikely to succeed. A battery outside the fort was also captured. From these prisoners, Butler learned that reinforcements from Richmond (some of General Hoke's Division) had begun to arrive in the Wilmington area. With Porter running low on ammunition, the fort's artillery still operational, reinforcements apparently on the way, and night falling Butler ordered his soldiers to cancel the attack and reembark on the troop transports. This ended the first attack on Fort Fisher.[13]

The Application of the Principles of Joint Warfare

What went wrong? Poor planning right from the start plagued the operation. Except for Welles, there was little enthusiastic support for the attack from the national command structure in Washington. In the army command, General Grant did not look on the operation as a central part of his military plan.[14] His primary focus was the destruction of the Confederate field armies. Grant, not wishing to significantly weaken his forces, was only willing to spare the minimum number of troops to do the job despite an earlier estimate (admittedly high) that to take Fort Fisher would require 25,000 men.[15] In

addition, only two field artillery batteries, minimum rations and ammunition, and no siege equipment was carried. The navy may have been interested in this operation, but unity of effort by the army was not a priority.[16]

At the operational and tactical level, teamwork between Porter and Butler was not present. Good relations were lacking and communication between the two principles was mostly left to subordinates. It seems clear from Porter's unwillingness to wait for Butler's arrival before blowing up the *Louisiana* or beginning the naval bombardment that he believed the fort could be taken by naval forces alone. Therefore, close coordination with Butler was not required. Butler, on the other hand, did not leverage the operational advantage the fleet provided. He did not have a satisfactory plan of attack. Both he and Porter appeared mesmerized by the powderboat. Neither commander asked the question what happens if the explosion does not have the desired effect? If naval bombardment and the powderboat fail, there was no back-up plan.

Under these circumstances, without a flexible well-coordinated plan the concentration of military power was never achieved and efforts to seize and maintain the initiative proved ineffective. On December 24th, Admiral Porter placed his 50 vessels in a line of battle to begin his fire. To achieve the maximum advantage of the combined force capabilities, the army landing needed to be made immediately follow the naval bombardment. The troop carriers were still miles away and Porter could not know if they would be delayed. As it turns out, they arrived on schedule late in the afternoon, but no landing could be accomplished that day since the ship carrying the landing craft was the last to arrive. Colonel Lamb had all night to repair any damage and rest his gunners.[17]

The second day did not turn out any better. Porter and Weitzel coordinated fire support, but waited hours before following up to see if the plan was still on track. Butler's forces were unable to marshal all their landing boats quickly and boat-handling skills were poor from lack of practice. The landing required more time than expected. When Porter found out the schedule was no longer valid, he was already running low on ammunition. The inadequate fire control from the day before had depleted his magazines. Speed and agility, so critical to maintaining the initiative and keeping the enemy off balance, was never achieved. The planning that was conceived was never exercised to work out all the potential problems.

Freedom of action was never achieved. Although the Confederate forces certainly were aware the fleet was coming, any surprise as to the exact timing of the attack was lost when Butler was required to wait off Cape Fear for three days, allowing Fort Fisher to prepare. The force structure did not allow for any unanticipated developments. No allowance was made for the friction of war. Weather and logistics turned against the Union forces. Butler was unable to get all his forces ashore on the second day. The fleet was short of ammunition and would be unable to provide proper support for another day of attacks on the fort. Grant, wishing to accomplish the mission cheaply and quickly, did not provide the army with a siege train or sustaining power for a protracted engagement.

The Union forces never had a clear understanding of how many Confederate defenders were within Fort Fisher or whether reinforcements were on the way. Knowledge of the enemy was lacking. Despite augmentation, the fort only contained 1,400 soldiers and additional reinforcement was not imminent. Butler, drawing a worst-

case conclusion based on the incomplete intelligence, failed to recognize that Fort Fisher was undermanned and vulnerable to a well-coordinated joint attack.

Butler, a political general, never had any formal military training.[18] His first victory in 1861 at Hatteras Inlet had led him to the wrong conclusion about naval forces. The fort at Hatteras was not the well-built fortification that Fort Fisher was. At Hatteras, Butler's only requirement had been to have his troops wait until the naval bombardment forced the Confederate forces to surrender.[19] The army was never required to make an attack. Butler was unable to see that the situation was different and did not understand the limitations on the capabilities of his sister service. Butler's inability to comprehend these factors was a major obstacle in integrating the joint operation as a whole.

The Second Attack on Fort Fisher

Although Lincoln and Welles were loath to criticize the navy's role in the attack, Grant was not so kind about the army's role. By the first week of the new year, he has made plans for a second attack on Fort Fisher with a new commander, Major General Alfred H. Terry. He was to use the same troops that Butler had, but with several significant additions. This time the expedition would not want for lack of supplies or troops. An additional hand picked brigade was added to the force bringing the total manpower available to the army up to 8,000. Grant ordered Major General Philip Sheridan to place a division upon transports and to have them waiting at Fort Monroe as a ready reserve in case Terry needed them.[20] The army received field guns, a siege train, abundant ammunition supplies, extra provisions, signal equipment, entrenching tools, and reserve coal for the troop transports. For the navy, large stocks of ammunition and coal were prepositioned at Beaufort.[21]

What had changed Grant's mind about the significance of Wilmington in so short a time? By the end of December, General Sherman had reached Savanna and was turning north to march through the Carolinas to eventually link up with Grant in Virginia. Fearing that North Carolina was not the granary Georgia had proven to be, Grant now saw Wilmington as the key to supplying Sherman. The Cape Fear River was navigable to Fayetteville and the railway reached inland to Goldsborough.[22] Grant, Halleck (who had been made Army Chief of Staff), Welles, and Stanton were all in agreement on the necessity of a second attack. This time the national command structure to include the army and navy were focused clearly on the objective and were determined to see that it was achieved.

At the operational level, Grant also made it clear to Terry that the two forces were to cooperate with one another: "It is exceedingly desirable that the most complete understanding should exist between yourself and the naval commander. I suggest, therefore, that you consult with Admiral Porter freely, and get from him the part to be performed by each branch of the public service, so that there may be unity of action….I would, therefore defer to him as much as is consistent with your own responsibilities."[23] In Terry, Grant had picked an ideal commander to work with Porter. Although the general was not a West Pointer, he was a savvy, battlefield-tested commander who was soft-spoken and generally got on well with everyone.[24] On January 8th, Terry came face-to-face with Porter for the first time when the combined fleets meet at Beaufort. Terry made the point to see the admiral aboard *his* flagship. From this time on, close coordination between the army and navy was to be a hallmark of the campaign.[25]

The Union forces arrived off Fort Fisher late in the day on January 12th, and the navy began the bombardment before dawn the next morning. This time Porter did not make the same mistakes that occurred during the first attack. He ordered his gunners not to fire high or randomly, but to concentrate systematically on the fort's guns, especially those on the land face. Also during the night, while the rest of the fleet retired, the ironclads were to maintain their fire in order to prevent the Confederates from repairing the damage. Their success denied Colonel Lamb, with only 1,500 men, the time even to bury his dead.[26]

By mid afternoon, Terry had landed his complete force five miles down the beach, each man with his basic load. Fort Fisher and the Confederates were unable to locate him. By nightfall, additional supplies including 300,000 rounds of ammunition, food for almost a week, and entrenching tools arrived on the beach.[27] Dawn found the Union army dug in behind breastworks two miles from the land face of the fort with a detachment protecting their rear from any attack by Hokes forces.[28] Unlike Butler, Terry led from the front and was ashore with his troops. He reconnoitered the land face from approximately 600 yards. Fearing that rough seas would make over-the-shore supply of a siege impractical, he was determined to make an attack the next day provided naval gunfire could breach the land face palisade and destroy more of the artillery.[29] Communicating with Porter, a division of vessels started the task. Exact and timely gunfire had been made possible, because on each of Porter's ships was an army officer who understood the army signal code and could either start and stop the naval gunfire or direct it to any point on the land or sea face that Terry wished.[30]

That night aboard Porter's flagship, the two commanders finished devising a two-pronged attack. Navy and marines numbering approximately 2,000 were to attack the northeast bastion. Simultaneously, the soldiers were to attack that western part of the land face nearest the river. The naval bombardment was to continue destroying the land face, until Terry gave the signal for the attack, in which case, the fleet was to switch their fire to the sea face. The ironclads continued to shell the fort all night.[31]

The sailors and marines were lead by Lieutenant Commander K. Randolph Breese. Using the marines with their Sharps carbines for covering fire, the sailors were to charge the fort in "a seaman like manner" using only cutlasses and pistols. This, however, proved tactically difficult to carry out. Porter's men were made up of sailors from 35 different ships, who had never trained or fought together before. Despite Breese's best effort, neither sailors nor marines were well organized by the time the attack took place.[32] On the opposite side of the peninsula, Brigadier General Adelbert Ames division was to mount the attack. Although slowed somewhat by the geographical terrain and obstacles, not the least of which was fire from a Confederate gunboat, the army was proceeding only slightly behind schedule. This could be attributed to two factors: excellent preparation and a naval fire support umbrella that deterred aggressive Confederate countermoves.[33]

When the signal was given to begin the attack, Porter lifted his fire on the land face and the gunners aimed at new targets. The seaman, still not really organized and more of a mob than an assault column, attacked with great enthusiasm. Their dash for the fort placed them in front of the army. Lamb, with nearly all his land guns disabled, quickly mobilized his forces to repel the navy. He was unaware that this was not the main attack

and that Ames was massing forces on his left. Lamb's small artillery and rifle fire take a tremendous toll on the naval forces. The navy retreated with almost 400 casualties.[34]

The navy "diversion" gained the army a few minutes in which to gain a toe hold within the fortification. The ensuing battle was bloody. Each traverse had to be taken individually and the hand-to-hand combat was fierce. At this stage, it was still unclear that the fort would fall. Porter, realizing that the army was in difficulty, moved the naval bombardment back to the land face, at times delivering fire within fifty yards of federal troops. "This phenomenally close support can be explained by three factors: first, the naval gunfire ships were in the ideal position of firing at right angles to the axis of the Federal advance so that errors in range did not endanger the friendly troops greatly; second, Civil War shells although potent, did not have the lethal radius of today's projectiles; third, the Confederate system of traverses and lateral fortifications formed compartments which protected not only the defenders but the attackers as well." The defenders, unable to withstand this type of combined attack, surrendered that evening.[35]

The Application of the Principles of Joint Warfare

Why was the second attack on Fort Fisher in January, 1865 such a success when the first attack had been a failure? Although the Union army commander was new, the troops were largely the same. Admiral Porter still commanded the Union navy. This time the full weight of the Union effort was directed toward the achievement of a common aim, the closing of the Port of Wilmington. The capture of Fort Fisher would make this possible. From the national level on down, unity of effort was present. Part of the reason may have been embarrassment over the failure of the first attack; nevertheless, Grant and the War Department provided the necessary tools to accomplish the mission.

The army was organized, trained, and equipped to fight skillfully and effectively under better-prepared leadership.

Between Porter and Butler effective coordination was never achieved. This time Grant made it clear that the command relationship was to consist of close consultation. Although unity of command was not formalized, Terry met frequently with Porter. The two commanders compared their plans in detail in an effort to make sure that contingencies were prepared for. By showing deference to the admiral where appropriate, Terry was able to foster a good working relationship with Porter. Unity of effort at the operational level was thus achieved.

Porter and Terry attempted to concentrate their military power by sequencing and synchronizing the employment of all navy and army forces. Terry, faced with the problem of protecting his rear from a possible attack by Confederate forces coming from Wilmington, had only 3,000 men or three brigades available to assault Fort Fisher. Too few to spread across the land face in sufficient numbers, the addition of the marines and sailors on his left helped solve this dilemma.[36] The Union concentration of force against the fort would be maintained while the army's rear blocking action would prevent the enemy from doing the same. Although ultimately successful militarily, from a joint force prospective, the lack of training and poor employment of the sailors led to excessive casualties. Porter, skillful at sea, could not provide the same qualitative edge on land. He certainly failed to display a frank appreciation and knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of his own forces. His sailors, without the opportunity to rehearse the plan, lacked the tactical skills to carry the assault off properly. Mass was achieved, but at a high cost.

From the start, Porter and Terry were able to seize and maintain the initiative and showed a high degree of agility in keeping the Confederate forces off-balance. For three days and two nights, the fleet was able maintain a steady bombardment of the fort. By the end of the second day, the systematic fire had destroyed all but one cannon on the land face. This withering fire was key in reducing the combat effectiveness of Fort Fisher. It was not only impossible to fix the damage, but the defenders were unable to prepare meals or get any sleep.[37] The demoralization and confusion this caused within the Confederate ranks cannot be overemphasized. Terry, for his part, was able to get his men and equipment ashore in a quick and efficient manner. With the aid of the fleet's firepower, he moved rapidly up the beach, grasped the tactical situation, and acted faster than the enemy could react. The timing and tempo of the army and navy operation working in concert exploited the Union capabilities and inhibited the response of the Confederates.

Logistics were the key in sustaining the operation and maintaining freedom of action. Due to effective planning up-front, fleet ammunition and coal did not run out at key moments. Older vessels were used to shuttle ammunition to the ironclads or bring coal from Beaufort. All resources were used and nothing was left to chance. Porter was able to continuously support Terry's forces in the field and adjust as conditions warranted. Terry's army arrived well prepared with the proper equipment and training. They surely must have hoped for a short campaign; nevertheless, they were prepared with everything they would need for a long siege. The strong logistical package provided insurance against poor weather, a stronger than anticipated enemy, or any of the other unforeseen circumstances of war.

Clear and concise communications gave the Union forces the tactical edge. Each army unit and navy ship knew its function. The assault planning was thorough and details were provided the fleet. Without common terms and procedures, communications could often be misinterpreted or not received in time. The use of the army code by a signal corpsmen placed on each ship was a brilliant adaptation to overcome the disparate and slow communication systems of the time. The devastating effect on the enemy of close and accurate naval fire support would not have been achieved without the capability to redirect the bombardment as the tactical situation changed.

Finally, at the operational level, the campaign planners correctly understood that the enemy's defensive structure made Fort Fisher a key center of gravity. If it fell, the rest of the outer defenses of Wilmington would be of little use and Wilmington would be exposed to direct attack. This resulted in Southern forces evacuating Wilmington on January 21st. The last contact the Confederacy had with the outside world was closed.

Notes

[1] Nash, 256; Browning, 277; Charles M. Robinson, III, *Hurricane of Fire: The Union Assault on Fort Fisher* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 27, 54.

[2] Barrett, 265-66; Ron Gragg, *Confederate Goliath: The Battle of fort Fisher* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 18-21, Nash, 257-58; Reed, 336.

[3] Barrett, 262-63; Reed, 332-33.

[4] Barrett, 332; Reed, 332.

[5] Browning, 287-88; Nash, 261; Reed, 333.

[6] Gragg, 41-42; Reed, 337.

[7] Nash, 267.

[8] Gragg, 46-52.

[9] Reed, 342.

[10] Nash, 263-64.

[11] Robinson, 124-29.

[12] Nash, 265.

[13] Robinson, 134-37; Maj Edwin H. Simmons, "The Federals at Fort Fisher," pt. 1, *Marine Corps Gazette* 35, no. 1 (January, 1951): 58.

[14] ORA, ser. 1, vol. 42, pt. 1:971-73; Reed, 333; Robinson, 83

[15] Nash, 258.

Notes

[16] Reed, 333; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 1:55; ORA, vol. 42, pt. 1:971-73.
[17] Reed, 346.
[18] Gragg, 37-38.
[19] Nash, 53.
[20] Reed, 357-58; Maj Edwin H. Simmons, “The Federals at Fort Fisher,” pt. 2, *Marine Corps Gazette* 35, no. 2 (February, 1951): 47.
[21] Nash, 268; ORN, ser. 1, vol. 11:392, 398, 402-04, 411, 442; Reed, 359.
[22] Hensel, 239; Reed, 357.
[23] ORA, vol. 42, pt. 1:43; Robinson, 149.
[24] Gragg, 106.
[25] Ibid., 108-09.
[26] Barrett, 272-74; Browning, 293-94; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:50.
[27] Nash, 268.
[28] Barrett, 273; Reed, 360.
[29] Gragg, 132; Reed, 361; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:50.
[30] Gragg, 133; ORN, vol. 11:436-42, 445; Reed, 363; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:50.
[31] Gragg, 133; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:50.
[32] Browning, 294; Nash, 269; Reed, 361; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:51.
[33] Reed, 367; Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:50.
[34] Nash, 269.
[35] Simmons, “Fort Fisher,” pt. 2:52.
[36] Reed, 361.
[37] Robinson, 155.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The study of history lies at the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practice.

Alfred Thayer Mahan

Joint operations were carried out in the Civil War with only general coordination between the army and the navy. The Secretaries of Navy and War as well as the respective commanders were often jealous of their prerogatives and were not above attempting to garner accolades at the expense of the other service. Doctrine for joint operations was lacking and the North appeared not to have drawn lessons from preceding campaigns in any systematic way. Nevertheless, a basic pattern did develop and was improved upon over time. Amphibious landings were prepared for by intensive bombardment of shore batteries or fortifications to silence or destroy them. Army (or marine) landings took place well out of range of the artillery and the force waited until the naval bombardment had achieved the desired effect before launching an attack.[1] Improvement occurred as seen by the progressive sophistication of the operations against Hatteras, New Bern, and Fort Fisher. However, not all commanders profited from the earlier experiences. Major General Butler, whether through lack of training or just plain incompetence, learned the wrong lesson at Hatteras and repeated it until Grant relieved him of command after the first campaign against Fort Fisher.

In comparison to World War II, these joint operations were crudely planned and executed. However, one cannot help but be impressed despite changes in technology and the invention of the airplane at the close similarities between events separated by over 80 years in time. The hallmark of the second campaign against Fort Fisher was the close fire support between the fleet and the army made possible by innovative communication procedures. By the end of the Civil War procedures were beginning to compare favorably with the state of amphibious operations in the Pacific theater as demonstrated by the following passage from *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys*: "In those places where it was essential to eliminate Japanese ground resistance in close-range fighting, great precision had to be developed in air-support operations in order to be certain not to hit our own troops, and to assure hits on the small targets which the critical Japanese positions presented. This required highly specialized training and the closest coordination between the ground and air forces through an intricate system of ground and air observers and unified control by ground-ship-air radio communications. In the Pacific War this system was continuously improved by the navy and marines in connection with succeeding amphibious operations against strongly defended positions and reached a high degree of effectiveness."[2] In both wars, the combined effects of the units involved could mean the difference between a stalemate or worse and victory.

During the Civil War, the chances for success went up when careful planning and preparation was present. Improvised joint operations could only succeed when they went against weak points in the Confederate defenses. The Union navy was able to guarantee safe passage of troops anywhere along the coast. This ability to attack almost at will greatly weakened the Confederate army by making it necessary to station troops at many

points along the shoreline. The situation ensured that some ports would be weakly guarded or contain hastily constructed fortifications. At these locations, no detailed planning or sophisticated equipment was required for the attack. The expeditions against Hatteras and Port Royal would certainly fall within this category. Once these towns were secured and the North was required to strike against stronger ports, ad hoc campaigns would no longer suffice. It is here that the modern principles of joint warfare come into play. Union amphibious operations in North Carolina would suggest that they are timeless and valid. Where they were generally followed such as at New Bern and the second campaign against Fort Fisher, Union forces met with success. Where they were ignored – the first campaign against Fort Fisher – Union forces had little chance to prevail. The closer the operation approached the ideal of fulfilling all the principles of joint warfare, the more likely it would be to achieve success.

Thomas Molyneux, writing in the 1750's about "conjunct expeditions" stated that the lack of cooperation between the naval and army commanders was seen as the main cause of that failure.[3] Several of the campaigns sited in this paper could be considered confirmation of this principle. At Fort Fisher, Porter and Butler cooperated poorly while the close working relationship between Porter and Terry presented a stark contrast. Every commander would like a close working relationship with his joint counterpart, but is it a necessary precondition for the successful completion of the mission?

This writer would argue that the answer lies elsewhere. Component commanders are expected to do two things: orchestrate the activity of their own forces and understand how their pieces fit into the overall plan.[4] Therefore, a well-designed plan is essential. At Hatteras and the first campaign against Fort Fisher, the navy had no directed fire plan

and the army had little concept of how to carry out its mission (Hatteras' success was irrelevant from a joint perspective sense it was due to the weakness of its defenses not the capabilities of the Union forces). The operational planning that was developed was never updated to fit the changing tactical situation. On the other hand, those elements were all present at New Bern and the second campaign against Fort Fisher. Both were classic *coup de main*, an aggressive simultaneous execution of supporting attacks that overloaded the enemy's ability to resist and respond effectively. Detailed, flexible planning rather than cooperation was the key to mission accomplishment.

Joint force movements, to be successful, need to be thought out in advance and pay careful attention to planning, organization, and logistics. Failure to anticipate and provide for contingencies doomed or made harder many Civil War campaigns and would do the same to modern-day joint operations. Joint operations are simply more complicated. Forces differ in tradition, training, equipment, and style. The principles are a tool; one designed to make the transition to fighting as a team easier, but not painless. Careful thought and planning is still required. Although following the principles of joint warfare in and of themselves does not guarantee success, history would indicate that ignoring them increases greatly the odds of failure against a strong opponent.

Notes

[1] Anderson, 296.

[2] *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys: Summary Report (Pacific War)* (1946; reprint, Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1987), 76.

[3] Thomas Molyneux, *Conjunct Expeditions or Expeditions that Have Been Carried on Jointly by the Fleet and Army with a Commentary on a Little War* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1759), 42.

[4] *Joint Pub 1*, viii.

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