

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEFENCES OF ELIZABETH CITY—HENNINGSEN'S ARTILLERY—RECONNOISSANCE BY COMMODORE LYNCH—HE IS CHASED BACK TO THE PASQUOTANK—I AM PLACED IN COMMAND OF FORT COBB—THE BATTLE OF ELIZABETH CITY—INCIDENTS—THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CONFEDERATE SQUADRON—COMMODORE LYNCH—RETREAT FROM ELIZABETH CITY—CROSS THE DISMAL SWAMP—INCIDENTS ALONG THE ROUTE—HENNINGSEN'S MEN—MARCH TO SUFFOLK—ARRIVAL AT NORFOLK—FIND THE "BEAUFORT" THERE—JOIN GENERAL WISE AT GREAT BRIDGE—RETURN TO NORFOLK AND REPORT TO COMMODORE BUCHANAN—HIS SQUADRON.

ELIZABETH CITY is on the Pasquotank river, twelve miles from its mouth. The river here is very narrow and on the right bank, at Cobb's Point, some two or three miles below, was a battery of four 32-pounder smooth-bore guns. The fort, as it was called, was a wretchedly constructed affair and not by any means a credit to the engineer officer who built it. I afterwards met this officer. He acknowledged that it was badly done; he said that when the citizens of Elizabeth City applied to General Huger to have a battery put up to protect the town, he was sent to do it. He thought that "Elizabeth City was the last place the Federals would attack," and slighted his work. It shows how uncertain war is, and how important discipline is.

The magazine of this fort resembled an African ant-hill more than anything else, and had its door fronting the river, and was of course entirely exposed. The guns were good enough, but they were badly mounted—only one could be trained to fire across the river, the others looked down the channel. We found at Elizabeth City General Henningsen with one or more batteries of light artillery, and after our arrival the militia were called out, and some of them were

sent into the fort. We learned that the Dismal Swamp canal was out of order, and vessels could not pass through. Commodore Lynch sent Captain Hunter by express to Norfolk for ammunition, and men to repair the canal.

We could hear firing in the direction of Roanoke island until about noon of this day; it then ceased and we knew the island had fallen. We felt sure Elizabeth City would be the next place attacked, and the commodore appointed me to concert a plan of defence with General Henningsen.

My idea was to land the guns of the vessels and mount them on shore, not together, but distributed on both sides of the river, and to place Henningsen's guns in pits or behind temporary embankments in the same way. By this method the enemy, after getting up with the fort, would have been brought under a very heavy cross fire, and his vessels being of light construction Henningsen's guns would have done them as much damage as our large cannon. The infantry were to seek the best cover they could find and act as sharpshooters along the bank of the river, which was not two hundred yards wide. But there not appearing to be time enough to make this disposition of our guns, it was decided that the schooner *Black Warrior* should be put over on the left bank of the river a little below the fort, and the remainder of the squadron which now consisted of the *Seabird*, *Ellis*, *Appomattox*, *Beaufort*, *Raleigh* and *Fanny*, should form line abreast across the channel, opposite the fort, and that Henningsen's artillery should be held in reserve. After making these dispositions Commodore Lynch started in the *Seabird* on the 9th for Roanoke island to reconnoitre, and took the *Raleigh* with him. During the afternoon of this day the *Beaufort* towed to the mouth of the canal a schooner loaded with quartermaster's stores; she eventually got to Norfolk with her very valuable cargo. About sunset Commodore Lynch returned in the *Seabird* having been chased by the enemy's vessels, which anchored at the mouth of the river about ten miles below the fort at 8 P. M. The *Raleigh* was

either sent to Norfolk *via* the C. and A. canal, or she escaped in that direction while being chased.

The enemy's squadron consisted of fourteen vessels, mounting 33 guns; to oppose which we had six vessels, mounting 8 guns, and the guns of the fort. The *Curlew* had been left at Roanoke Island, where she was burned by her crew. The *Forrest* was hauled up on the ways at Elizabeth City, and the *Raleigh* was probably in Norfolk. Commodore Stephen C. Rowan was in command of the Federal vessels, and we knew him to be a dashing officer.

We anchored abreast the fort in our position, and spent most of the night in dividing the ammunition, so that each vessel should have an equal share. I passed the evening talking over matters with the commodore, and we both concluded that affairs looked blue. The canal being out of order, escape was impossible in that direction, and nothing remained but to fight it out. I went back to the *Beaufort* about two o'clock in the morning and sent for Johnson to give him directions for the next morning. After telling him to give the men breakfast before daylight and then to have everything ready for action, and to call me as soon as he saw the enemy getting underweigh, I went to my cabin and threw myself on my berth "all standing." I really believe I did not take off my sword and pistol; and I know I did not remove my cap. I never was so tired in my life. For more than a week I had not had my clothes off, had had but little sleep, and been in a constant state of excitement. I soon dropped off, and in less than a minute (as it seemed to me) Johnson called me to say the enemy was underweigh and coming up.

"Have the men had their breakfast?" said I. "Yes, sir," said Johnson. "Is the gun cleared away and ready for action?" "Yes, sir," he replied, "the men are at their quarters, the fires are out, the magazine is opened, and we are all ready for battle." "Very well," I answered; and Johnson went forward. I fell back on my pillow and commenced to moralize: how delightful, thought I, 'twould be to be on shore in the

woods where I can hear the birds welcoming the rising sun:

"The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,"

and all that sort of thing; here are these confounded fellows coming up to break the peace when I so particularly wish to remain quiet; why will men fight, and before breakfast, too; why not lead a life of peace? why not——. "Look here, Captain," said Johnson, "the enemy is right on top of us!" I sprang up and bade adieu to my moralizing. Upon reaching the hurricane-deck I think I saw the relieved expression of my men. I had not thought of it before, but my non-appearance had given rise to some anxiety.

The enemy were coming up at full speed and our vessels were underweigh ready to abide the shock when a boat came off from the shore with the bearer of a dispatch for me; it read: "Captain Parker with the crew of the *Beaufort* will at once take charge of the fort—Lynch." "Where the devil," I asked, "are the men who were in the fort?" "All run away," said the messenger. And so it was; they had recollected that:

"Souvent celui qui demeure,
Est cause de son meschef, &c."

and had taken to their heels. The enemy's vessels were by this time nearly in range, and we were ready to open fire. I did not fancy this taking charge at the last moment, but there was no help for it, so I put the men in the boats with their arms and left the *Beaufort* with the pilot, engineer and two men on board. I directed the pilot to slip the chain and escape through the canal to Norfolk if possible, otherwise to blow the steamer up rather than be captured. He "cut out," as Davy Crockett says, accordingly. While pulling ashore the officers and men were engaged in tearing some sheets into bandages to be used for the wounded men: a cheerful occupation under the circumstances! but it was one of the delights of serving in these gunboats that no surgeons were allowed.

All the wounded had to be sent to the flag ship for treatment. Upon getting into the fort I hastily commenced stationing the men at the guns, and as quickly as possible opened fire upon the advancing enemy. Some of the officers and men of the *Forrest* made their way to us upon learning that the militia had fled. I must not forget to say that the engineer officer who had been sent from Richmond for service in the fort remained bravely at his post. He asked me to report this fact in case he was killed. He was a Prussian, and I think his name was Heinrich. He was not the engineer who built the fort. I found Commodore Lynch on shore; his boat had been cut in two by a shot and he could not get off to his ship, as he informed me, and he furthermore said I was to command the fort without reference to his being there; that if he saw an opportunity to get off to the *Seabird* he should embrace it.

The enemy's vessels came on at full speed under a heavy fire from our vessels and the fort. The fire from the latter was ineffectual. The officers and men were cool enough; but they had not had time to look about them. Everything was in bad working order, and it was difficult to train the guns. Just before we commenced to fire two of my men brought a man to me and said in the most indignant manner: "Captain here's a man who says he don't want to fight!" The idea of one of the *Beaufort's* not wanting to fight seemed to irritate them exceedingly. I looked and beheld my poor cook trembling before me. The men held him up by the collar, for his legs refused to do duty. He was a delicate-looking Spaniard and, poor fellow, could speak very little English. He had been captured in a prize and had shipped in the *Beaufort* for the want of something better to do. He knew nothing about the war and cared less. In the fight at Roanoke he had been stationed in the magazine, and as it was pitch dark there had fondly imagined himself in a safe place; but it was different here in the broad daylight. "*Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère!*" Falling on his knees before me, he could only say: "captain, me no wantee fight," which he kept repeating.

Poor fellow, I thought, I don't wantee fight either—at least, not until after breakfast. "Put him in the magazine," said I, recalling his former station, and thought no more about him. But he was to be my *bête noir* that day, for in the heat of the battle two of Henningsen's horsemen brought him to me between them. He had fled from the magazine, and they had captured him. He was in an exceedingly limp condition; but I said, as before, "put him in the magazine," which was done. He got away again, however, and beat us all to Norfolk—and that's saying a good deal.

Commodore Rowan's steamers did not reply to our fire until quite close, and without slackening their speed they passed the fort and fell upon our vessels. They made short work of them! The *Seabird* was rammed and sunk by the *Commodore Perry*. The *Ellis* was captured after a desperate defence, in which her gallant commander, James Cook, was badly wounded. The schooner *Black Warrior* was set on fire and abandoned, her crew escaping through the marshes on their side of the river. The *Fanny* was run on shore near the fort and blown up by her commander, who with his crew escaped to the shore. Before the *Ellis* was captured some of her officers and men attempted to reach the shore—among them, Midshipman Wm. C. Jackson, a handsome youth of 17—he was to have joined my ship the next day. He was shot in the water while swimming on shore. I do not blame the enemy for this—it was unavoidable—but it was a melancholy affair. He was taken on board the U. S. steamer *Hetzel* and received every attention. He died at 10 p. m. the same day, and was buried on shore. Captain Sims, of the *Appomattox* kept up a sharp fire from his bow gun until it was accidentally spiked; and he then had to run for it. He had a howitzer aft which he kept in play; but upon arriving at the mouth of the canal he found his vessel was about *two inches* too wide to enter; he therefore set her on fire, and she blew up. The *Beaufort* got through to Norfolk.

We in the fort saw this work of destruction going on with-

out being able to prevent it. As soon as the vessels passed the fort we could not bring a gun to bear on them, and a shot from them would have taken us in reverse. A few rounds of grape would have killed and wounded all the men in the fort, for the distance was only a few hundred yards. Seeing this, I directed Johnson to spike the guns, to order every man to shoulder his musket, and then to take down the flag. All this was promptly and coolly done, and upon the fact being reported to me by Johnson, I pointed to some woods in our rear and told him to make the best of his way there with the command. All this time Commodore Lynch had stood quietly looking on, but without uttering a word. As his command had just been destroyed under his eyes, I knew pretty well what his feelings were. Turning to him I said: "Commodore, I have ordered the fort evacuated." "Why so, sir?" he demanded. I pointed out the condition of affairs I have just stated, and he acquiesced. Arm in arm we followed the retreating men. The enemy had by this time turned their attention from the ships to the fort and commenced firing shot and shell in our direction. We had to cross a ploughed field, and we made slow progress. I wished very much that the commodore was twenty years younger. I felt that instead of a slow walk, a sharp run would have been better exercise—more bracing, as it were. We had nearly reached the woods when I met my two men, Robinson and Downard, posting back in great haste. They took their hats off when they saw me and looked a little sheepish. "Were you not ordered into the woods?" I inquired. "Yes, sir," answered they. "Then where are you going?" I demanded. "Come back to look for you, sir," said Robinson. They had missed me in the woods, and fearing I had been killed or wounded were going back to carry me off! And here was my first lieutenant, Johnson, aiding and abetting them! As soon as we struck the road we procured a guide, and as we had to pass Elizabeth City which was now in possession of the enemy, we hurried up for fear of being taken prisoners. We had observed that some of the vessels carried

troops—in fact there was a Rhode Island regiment present—and we expected they would land and intercept us. The officers and men of the *Fanny* and *Forrest*, and stragglers from the other vessels, reported to me and I found I was, next to the commodore, the senior officer on shore. I soon got the commodore off in a buggy, and I begged him to make the best of his way to Richmond. It was the most extraordinary-looking vehicle I ever laid my eyes on, and I felt sure it would cause a sensation in Richmond if the commodore's report did not.

I had been told by Commodore Lynch that if I evacuated the fort I was to fall back on Henningsen. I fell back as fast as I could, but did not see anything of his command. After we had gotten by Elizabeth City we felt pretty safe against capture, particularly as by twelve o'clock I had my entire command mounted or in country wagons, and I got them in something like military organization, with commissary, quartermaster, etc.

The scenes along the road were distressing, and yet sometimes so comical that one found himself laughing with the "tear in his eye." We passed at one place the smoking ruins of a house. The neighbors told me it had been occupied by a Union man who upon learning of the success of the Federals at Elizabeth City had refused even water to the retreating troops of Henningsen. Locking up his house he took up a position in the upper story, and finally ended by firing on the soldiers who were about the house and killed one of them. The soldiers burned the house with the man in it. Passing another place I saw a young girl in convulsions and screaming at the top of her lungs. Her parents were trying to pacify her in vain. I added my persuasions, I told her everything would be all right, the war would soon be over, etc. "Oh! what does it matter," said she, "if the war *is* soon over, if all the *men* are killed?" I "passed."

The kindness and hospitality of the people along the route was unbounded. Just before sunset my quarter-master, who

had been riding in advance, reported that a gentleman living near by had offered to give us all supper and a night's lodging. I gladly accepted his offer. At this time I overtook General Henningsen and his staff—I never did catch up with his guns. The general was opposed to my remaining on that side of the river for the night, and said we would be captured. I told him the offer was too good to be declined, and added (for the recollection of his troopers bringing back my unfortunate cook to the fort, and their remarks, had left a sore spot): “General, I was told to fall back on you and have been doing so all day; now I intend to stop.” I wish I could recall the name of the gentleman who entertained us. I had about 150 officers and men, and to supply us all was no light tax—to say nothing of the animals. The men were given a good supper and quarters in the barn, and the officers received in his house. There were many ladies there—refugees from Elizabeth City. They forgot their own troubles and insisted on waiting upon us at table. It was only one of the many instances of the noble and inspiring conduct of the Southern women. *They* never gave up. In the darkest hour of the war they had an encouraging word. As for the sick and wounded, God knows what they would have done without their kind nurses. Scott has rendered woman a tribute; but the wars of the world have never produced the equal of the Southern woman.

We left our kind friends at 3 o'clock next morning, and I sent our quarter-master on ahead to order breakfast at a tavern where I knew we should arrive about 8 o'clock. I was told that it would take us two days to reach Suffolk as the road across the Dismal Swamp would not permit of rapid traveling; but I made up my mind I would be there that night if it were possible. The *Merrimac*, I knew, would be soon ready for her crew, and it was most important to get the men with me to Norfolk as quickly as possible. There were no sailors to spare at the South. We arrived at the tavern and breakfasted—the ladies there (refugees) attending to our wants at table, and everybody doing all in their power to assist us in getting on. The

proprietor would take no pay, so we could only offer our thanks, and after giving three cheers we started. About 12 we came to a cross-road country store and were told that Commodore Lynch had passed and ordered dinner for the men; but as they had so lately breakfasted I would not stop. I rode in the rear of the command and kept the horses moving. About 3 in the afternoon I was hailed from a house and found there Commodore Lynch. The hospitable owner would not hear of our continuing on our way without stopping for some refreshment, so I consented to remain; and in a short time he and his wife and daughters, with their servants, were busily engaged preparing it. The commodore started off alone in his gig for Suffolk. We remained an hour and then left, and traveling at good speed arrived at Suffolk at 9 P. M. We had made nearly forty miles since leaving the fort the day before, which, under the circumstances, was not bad traveling. The first news I got was that the commodore had not arrived. He told me afterward he took the wrong road and did not get to Suffolk until the next day. We were most kindly received at Suffolk, and learning that a special train was about returning to Norfolk I put my command on board and sent the horses and wagons back to their owners. We got safely to Norfolk, and at midnight I awakened Commodore Forrest at the Navy Yard and reported the disastrous result of the battle of Elizabeth City. I learned to my great gratification that the *Beaufort* was safely alongside the wharf at the Yard. Upon Captain Hunter's arrival a force had been put to work on the canal, and the *Beaufort* had succeeded in getting through.

After the fall of Roanoke island General Wise had retreated from Nag's Head in the direction of Norfolk on the line of the Chesapeake and Albemarle canal, and I was sent up the canal in the *Beaufort* to co-operate with him. We went up about the 12th of February, and after making a reconnoissance as far as North river I returned to Great Bridge where I met the General and his men. We had very cold, disagreeable weather, and Wise's men as they arrived looked in bad condition. The

General's son, Captain O. Jennings Wise, was killed at Roanoke island, and he himself seemed in poor health and worse spirits. In fact the result of the past week's fighting had dispirited us all, and the cold, sleeting weather did not tend to cheer us up. Wise had in his brigade all the Nicaragua *filibusters* I had ever heard of. I do not know how they happened to congregate in his brigade, but they did. The most noted of these men and the one who particularly interested me was Henningsen. He had been Walker's right hand man and military adviser in all his operations in Central America. He was a tall, gaunt man with sandy hair and florid complexion—of Scandinavian origin, he looked the picture of an ancient Viking. He wore a slouched hat and a monkey jacket and walked with a staff. Commencing life as an officer in the British army he had served in the Don Carlos war in Spain, and after serving in various armies of Europe and in Nicaragua had finally turned up in the confederacy. He was the most perfect Major Dalgetty I ever met, and he frequently came on board the *Beaufort* to see me. At this time he was a colonel in the Confederate army; but for some reason he was not employed after the operations I am describing.

As I have before said, Wise's brigade was scattered between Elizabeth City and Nag's Head at the time Roanoke island was attacked. Why it was not concentrated on the island I have never learned. A portion of it was in the battle and a battalion belonging to it was on its way there. One regiment was at Nag's Head and Henningsen with his artillery was at Elizabeth City. There may have been good reasons for this, want of transportation or something, but I have failed to discover them. I know now that if our force had been assembled at the "marshes" and proper fortifications put there we could have kept the Burnside expedition at bay. And even as it was, if there had been more men on the island and they had stood to their guns the troops of Burnside could not have landed. The vessels not only did not pass the island, but did not attempt to do so until the forts had been turned and cap-

tured by the army. Pork Point battery which stood the brunt of the bombardment on the 7th was hardly damaged. Captain Loyall has since told me that by the aid of some thirty negroes they had there on the night of the 7th, the fort was in as good condition on the morning of the 8th as it was the morning before. Only another instance of the impossibility of demolishing an earthwork by a distant and non-continuous bombardment.

I returned to Norfolk about the 20th of February for repairs. My executive officer was here detached and ordered to New Orleans, otherwise there was no change in my officers. I was now ordered to report to Flag Officer Franklin Buchanan who had been put in command of the vessels in the waters of Virginia. His command consisted of the *Merrimac* (iron clad), *Beaufort* and *Raleigh* at Norfolk, and the steamers *Patrick Henry*, *Jamestown* and *Teaser* on the James river. There were several vessels building in Richmond and five or six new gunboats in Norfolk. Two of the latter, the *Hampton* and the *Nansemond*, were nearly ready. I shall speak of these vessels in another place. They were none of them engaged in the operations in Hampton Roads which were so soon to follow.