

# THE STORY OF A CAMPAIGN THAT FAILED



U.S. Navy gunboats firing from the river at Confederate forces, as Union artillery and infantry move into position on the near shore

by Donald E. Collins

Though the songs and poetry of the Civil War are voluminous, they are often of poor quality and were usually written by amateur poets of little ability. Many of these poems appeared in the form of broadside ballads, printed on one side of a single sheet of paper. The broadside offered mediocre talents an opportunity to disseminate their creations in the widest and most economical way possible. Such publications were essentially throw-a-ways that, by their nature, were not meant to be saved for posterity. Frequently printed on flimsy paper, they were most often discarded after reading; sometimes they would be tacked on walls or, at best, collected in personal albums or scrapbooks. Leslie Shepard describes them as “histories in song” that gave “news in verse.” Such ballads often “served the function of [a] newspaper, and [had] probably as much accuracy in reporting as the popular newspaper of today.”<sup>1</sup>

Shepard’s assessment of the news function of broadside ballads is undoubtedly true of Dr. Sutherland’s song, “*Shelling of Fort Anderson, March 14th, 1863.*” A search of the roster of the 92<sup>nd</sup> New York Volunteer Regiment reveals that “Dr. Sutherland” was Private German H. Sutherland, a 46-year-old physician. He was serving with his regiment on that day in March when Fort Anderson at New Bern came under attack by Confederate forces under the command of North Carolina’s Brigadier General James J. Pettigrew.

From a Confederate point of view, the poem might more properly be called “*The Story of a Campaign that Failed.*” The capture of the fort was a part of Major General D.H. Hill’s plan to pin down Federal troops stationed in New Bern, the Union Army’s headquarters in coastal North Carolina. The tactic was part of a more general Confederate movement geared toward revitalizing Confederate supply lines to General Robert E. Lee’s army. In *Ironclads*

<sup>1</sup> Shepard, Leslie. *The Broadside Ballad; A Study in Origins and Meaning*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1962, p. 24.

and *Columbiads*, William Trotter points out that the attack on New Bern was originally conceived as part of a diversionary tactic which included a simultaneously launched surprise offensive against the town of Washington in Beaufort County, the weaker of the two Union strongholds. If successful, Confederate supply trains would thus be free to remove the agricultural produce then accumulating in eastern North Carolina. Inclement weather, however, prevented a simultaneous attack on the two positions, and Hill decided to concentrate instead on New Bern. Pettigrew, with most of Hill's artillery, was to attack Fort Anderson across the Neuse River from New Bern and engage any Federal gunboats supporting the town's defenses.<sup>2</sup> But Pettigrew's failure to take the fort left the attack as a mere footnote in history, virtually ignored in the published literature and buried in archives and official records. Sutherland's verse provides the only known first-hand account of the battle from within the walls of Fort Anderson and documents a nearly forgotten skirmish.

James Johnston Pettigrew is described by Sutherland as "that 'rebel gent', the brave old Pettigrew." Author, scholar, soldier, and Renaissance man, the North Carolina general's humanity prevented the needless slaughter of the New Yorkers of the 92<sup>nd</sup>, as well as that of the Confederates in his own brigade. He had been commissioned as colonel of the 22<sup>nd</sup> North Carolina Regiment in August 1861 and was made a general at the beginning of the Peninsula campaign. After the Battle of Seven Pines, in which he was severely wounded, he was given command of a brigade stationed in northeastern North Carolina as part of Hill's command of the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds.

Pettigrew's brigade, consisting of the 11<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>, and 52<sup>nd</sup> North Carolina Regiments, left Goldsboro on 9 March, headed for New Bern. On the following day, Major John C. Haskell's artillery joined the march, taking up the rear. That evening, Pettigrew received orders to proceed from Kinston to Barrington's Ferry, near Fort Anderson, where he was to open a concentrated fire that would enable him to seize the fort. From this position, he was then to shell Union shipping and barracks across the Neuse River in New Bern in preparation for an assault on the town itself by an army under General Hill. Hill informed Pettigrew that it was important for the attack to begin on 12 March.<sup>3</sup>

But the schedule was impossible to maintain, for heavy rains had left swamps flooded and the roads in extremely bad condition. Bridges broke under the weight of the 20-pounder Parrott cannons, and men worked through the night in freezing water to repair them. A three-mile wide swamp had turned into quicksand and had to be bridged in a new place. Although Pettigrew pushed his men day and night, the infantry arrived at the destination a day late and still had to wait for the artillery and supplies, which had lagged behind. Late on 13 March, with the original deadline for commencing the attack already past, Pettigrew's tired army made camp nearby, unobserved by the men of Fort Anderson.

A reconnaissance showed that Fort Anderson would be a formidable challenge. The walls of the simple earthwork structure were only eight-to-nine feet high, but the fort was protected by a wide ditch in front and the river to the rear. The only approach, along a road a quarter mile long, was just wide enough for a small wagon. The road was flanked by a large swamp on one side and a swampy creek on the other. The fort itself was situated on the north bank of the Neuse within full view of Union barracks across the river in New Bern<sup>4</sup>. The 250-300 men of the 92<sup>nd</sup> New York within the fort were under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hiram Anderson Jr., for whom the fort was named.

<sup>2</sup> Trotter, William R. *Ironclads and Columbiads: The Civil War in North Carolina*. Vol. 3. Greensboro: Signal, 1989. 3 vols. 1988-89, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, Robert N. *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Series I, Vol. 18. Washington: General Printing Office. 18 vols. 1880-1901, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193

Pettigrew preferred to take the fort by bayonet. This would allow him to accomplish his objective without alerting the Union forces across the river. He hesitated, however, to send his infantry into the trap that the terrain presented. The result, he estimated, would be a minimum of 50 casualties.<sup>5</sup>

Pettigrew decided, instead, to attack the fort with an intense, concentrated artillery fire, with the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry Regiment (commanded by Henry King Burgwyn Jr.) held in reserve for a final assault if necessary. He ordered the attack to begin at approximately 5:45 a.m., on Saturday, 14 March 1863, the first anniversary of the day the Confederates had surrendered New Bern to the Union. Although coincidental, the date had a curious effect on Union troops. Reviews, salutes, and “plenty of beer” had been planned for the day’s festivities, so when the firing commenced, the Union garrison in New Bern assumed the barrage was in honor of the original taking of the city. The realization that an actual attack had begun, however, put an abrupt end to all thoughts of celebration.<sup>6</sup>

An early attempt by Pettigrew to demoralize the New Yorkers with a brief, intense bombardment followed by a show of the entire Confederate force failed. The ensuing respite, during which surrender was discussed, was used instead by the Union troops to delay the attack. A highly anxious Colonel Anderson repeatedly ordered his flagman to signal for more reinforcements: “*The enemy is in front of us in large force, with artillery; we want men.*” And again, “*Send more men; send them quickly.*” Headquarters commander Major General John G. Foster tried to reassure him: “*Hold out as long as you can; lie close; men are coming.*”<sup>7</sup> But Foster apparently never gave land reinforcements serious consideration.

Following Pettigrew’s failed attempt to secure a bloodless surrender from Fort Anderson, the fierce artillery attack resumed. During the following four hours, the firing proved so intense that the men of the 92<sup>nd</sup> New York huddled in the fort, unable to return fire. Every tent and house was riddled by shot and shell. Anderson’s house was “ventilated” by 200 balls, while the parade ground was literally blown up by the well-directed artillery fire.<sup>8</sup> In his book *The Civil War in North Carolina*, John Barrett notes “*that so many shell fragments fell in the river behind Fort Anderson that a New England journalist described the water as resembling ‘a pond in a hailstorm’.*”<sup>9</sup>

Rescue for the beleaguered garrison came not by land as Anderson had requested, but by water. The gunboats *Shawsheen*, *Hetzel*, *Ceres*, and *Hunchback* soon appeared on the river to join the action. The initial effort of the *Shawsheen* almost proved disastrous for the men of the 92<sup>nd</sup>. That vessel, “*through the stupidity, excitement, or drunkenness of its commanding officer ... [was] going to open fire on the only place where the garrison of the fort were covered from the fire of the enemy.*”<sup>10</sup> Second Lieutenant Henry T. Merrill saved the day as he mounted the paddle-box of the *Shawsheen* and directed the fire of the gunboats and the shore batteries on the south side of the river. He was aided from within the fort by First Lieutenant Nathaniel S. Barstow and his flagman, who directed the fire of the gunboats with commands to “*Fire higher,*” “*Fire to the left,*” “*Fire to the right.*”<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, the Union shells did little damage, even though many landed within the

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, Clyde N. *Carolina Cavalier, The Life and Mind of James Johnston Pettigrew*. Athens: University of Georgia P, 1990, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, John G. *The Civil War in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1963, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> Scott p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 185

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 171, 185-86.

Confederate lines, which were only 450-600 yards from the fort.<sup>12</sup>

Pettigrew found that his worst enemy was not the Union gun-boats, but the inadequacy of his own artillery. In his haste to leave Kinston, he was forced to leave behind a Whitworth gun that was en route from Wilmington. As it turned out, that was the only gun that would have been capable of countering the gunboats in the river; for want of it, the expedition would be lost. Beyond this, he was damned by the failure of his four 20-pounder Parrott cannons. They were “*worse than useless*,” Pettigrew complained. “*Half of the shells ... burst just outside of the guns. They turned over in the air and were perfectly harmless to the enemy*”.<sup>13</sup> The axle of one Parrott cannon broke, rendering it unserviceable. Shortly thereafter, another Parrot burst, killing one man and wounding two others. Colonel Burgwyn reported that after this explosion, “*the men who manned the others were distrustful of firing them*.”<sup>14</sup> A frustrated Pettigrew exclaimed in his report to artillery headquarters, “*I hope never to see them again*.”<sup>15</sup>

Confederate artillery problems were compounded by ammunition of such poor quality that hitting the Union gunboats was less a matter of precision than of chance. The light artillery proved effective against the fort but had no effect on the gunboats, which simply moved out of range in the wide river.

These problems convinced Pettigrew that the principal objective of the expedition was unattainable. Continued exposure to the firing of the better-equipped gunboats would simply subject his men and equipment to unnecessary risk. He briefly considered taking the fort with the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry, which had been waiting since daylight and could accomplish the task, he reasoned, in five minutes. Pettigrew finally decided that the advantage of capturing 300 “two-years men” and taking a fort that he could not hold was not worth the price in either Union or Confederate lives.<sup>16</sup> It was better to withdraw and fight another day.

Three months later, Pettigrew’s brigade would be one of those to breach the Union wall at Gettysburg in what could as easily have been called Pettigrew’s, as Pickett’s, Charge. Eleven days later, “the rebel gent” received his fifth and final wound in a skirmish while defending Lee’s army as it crossed the Potomac River in its retreat into Virginia. Characteristically, he chose death over surrender to an enemy whose doctors could have saved his life. As he had shown his willingness to do so many times, the “brave old Pettigrew” gave his life for his beloved Confederacy.<sup>17</sup>

The attack on Fort Anderson (Pettigrew’s first independent battle) was, in fact, only a skirmish. Casualties were slight despite the furious nature of the bombardment by Confederate artillery and Union gun-boats. A total of four men were killed - two on each side. Only one man in Fort Anderson died. Twenty-one Confederates received wounds, mostly minor, while only four Union soldiers were wounded.<sup>18</sup> The incident at Fort Anderson was less a case of what happened than what might have happened. Confederate success would have placed much of eastern North Carolina back into Southern control - and deprived the Union of a base from which to continue making its frequent attacks into the interior of the state.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, Archie K., *Boy Colonel of the Confederacy: the Life and Times of Henry King Burgwyn Jr.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Scott pp. 189, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Trotter p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Scott p. 193; Wilson p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Scott pp. 184, 194.