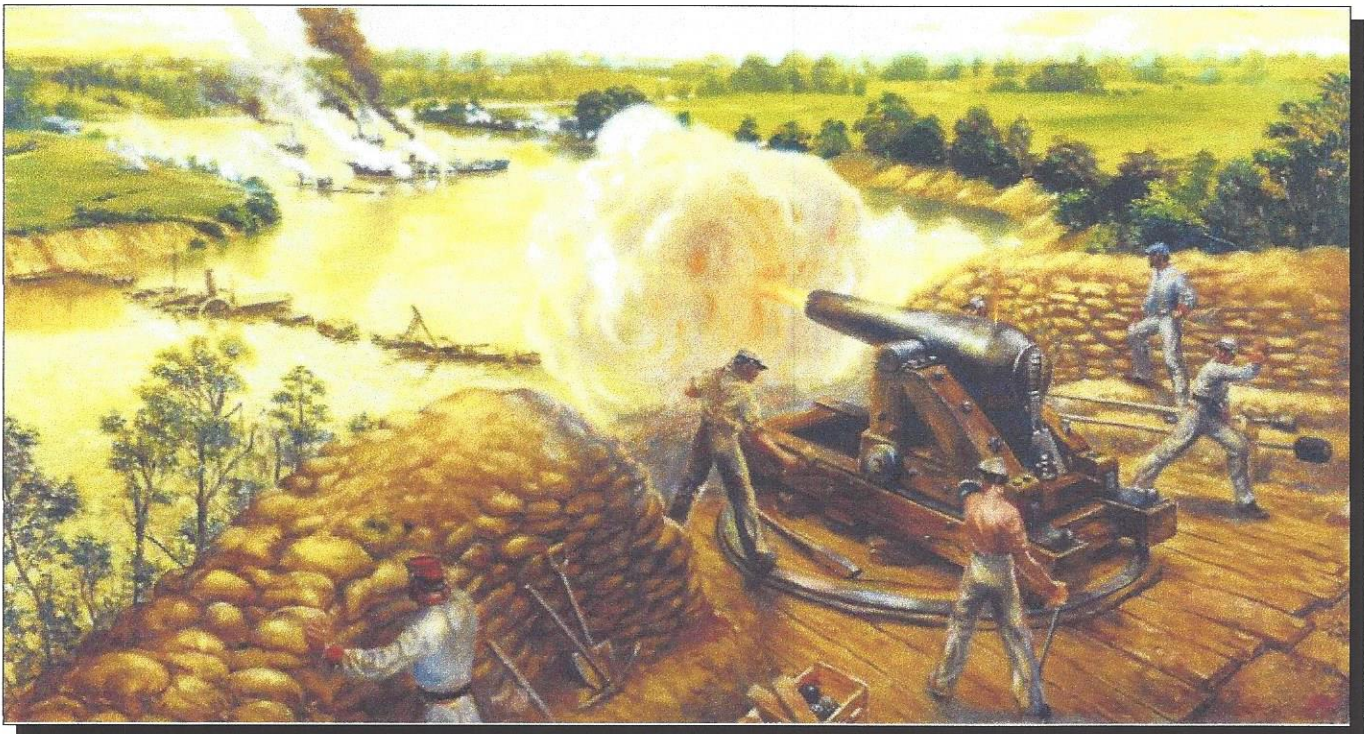


UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

“Brother against Brother: Iron challenges Earth” US Marines oppose CS Marines at the Battle of Drewry’s Bluff

On 15 May 1862 a squadron of U.S. Navy warships engaged Confederate positions on Drewry’s Bluff along the James River in an attempt to assault Richmond from the water. The Confederate actions at the bluff blocked the river access to Richmond for the rest of the war and would force all later Union operations against the city to rely on overland routes. Although the battle and its aftermath had a marked impact on the war, many of the details, especially concerning the Marines of both sides, are little known. The engagement at Drewry’s Bluff would mark one of the few times during the American Civil War where United States Marines and Confederate States Marines would directly face each other, and would see extraordinary heroism on both sides. The first Congressional Medal of Honor presented to a U.S. Marine, Cpl. John Mackie, would be awarded for his actions at Drewry’s Bluff. The Marine Corps of both sides played a notable role in the story of this battle, and the conduct and actions of those Marines would reflect the very foundation upon which our Corps is built.



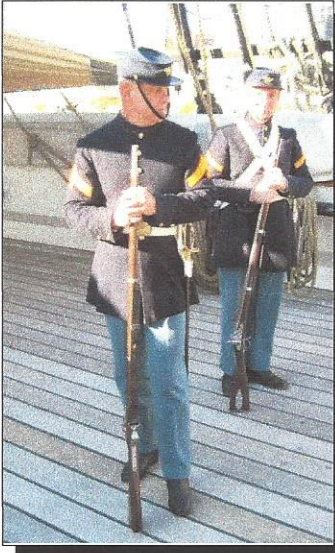
The Union perspective;

On 8 March 1862 the latest technological development in Naval warfare would have its American baptism of fire. On the previous day the CSS *Virginia*, the first Confederate “Iron Clad” built from the scuttled hull of the former the USS *Merrimack*, sailed out of the Rebel held Norfolk Navy Yard and engaged the blockading US fleet at Hampton Roads. In quick succession the *Virginia* sank the USS *Cumberland* and crippled the USS *Congress*, both conventional wooden hulled sailing vessels. That night the purpose built Iron Clad USS Monitor arrived on the scene. At around 8 a.m. the morning of the 8th, the two iron titans opened fire on each other. After several hours, with neither vessel being able to inflict serious damage on the other, the two vessels broke off, ending the engagement in a tactical draw. The battle had shown the effectiveness of the new technology, but it also made the Federal leaders painfully aware that if they were to gain access to the James River they would have to neutralize both the CSS *Virginia* and the Confederate coastal defenses surrounding Hampton Roads.

Two Months later, on 8 May 1862, in order to relieve the stalled land advance of Gen. McClellan’s up the James Peninsula, the Navy would make their move. By direct order of President Lincoln, US Naval vessels

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

attacked the rebel batteries at Sewell's Point at the mouth of the James River. After a heated exchange of artillery fire the Southern forces withdrew from the positions. Following the Confederate abandonment of the Sewell's Point batteries and the subsequent withdrawal from the Norfolk Navy Yard on 9 May 1862, a battalion of US Marines was sent to re-garrison the Navy Yard. On 11 May the CSS ironclad *Virginia*, with safe anchorage lost and her draft too deep to retreat up the James, was scuttled to prevent her from falling into federal hands. The Federal occupation of these sites and the removal of the *Virginia* as a seagoing threat now opened safe access to the James River offering a water approach to Richmond.

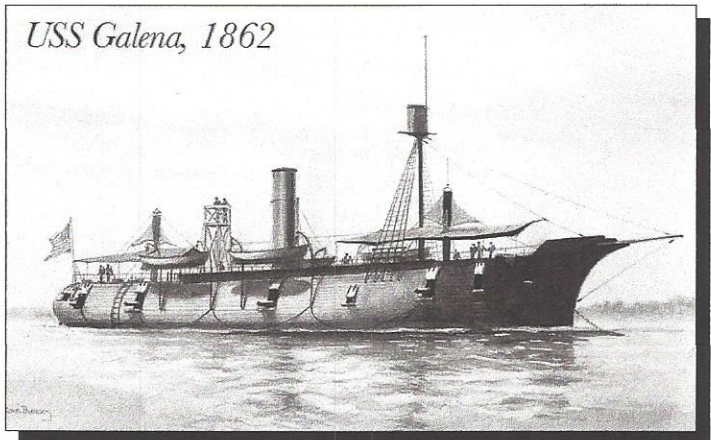


Now having control of Hampton Roads and its tributaries, the Federals felt that the possibility of a successful move up the James River toward Richmond was reasonable, and could well bring a quick end to the war. The decision to take on such a mission was based on several assumptions. Although the Commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Flag Officer L.M. Goldborough, knew that the Confederates would prepare for such a venture he concluded that the obstructions "*having been put down hurriedly*" and that there would be "*no great difficulty*" for the task force "*in clearing a passageway*" and proceed to Richmond. Ultimately, the Confederate preparations would prove much more in depth that Goldsborough anticipated. On 15 May 1862 a Union naval squadron under the command of Cmdr. John Rodgers, USN probed up the James River. If they could bring enough force up the river and bring Richmond under the weight of naval gunfire the Confederate capital would be forced to choose between surrender or inevitable destruction.

The Union flotilla included the USS *Monitor*; her sister ironclad *Galena*, which would act as Comdr. Rodgers' flagship; the floating battery *Naugatuck*; and the side-wheel steamboat *Port Royal*, all of which had Marine detachments aboard.

The *Galena*, although one of the first three ironclad warships commissioned by the US Navy, was of a traditional hull design, powered by both sail and steam, and not purpose built like the *Monitor*. Her armor was made up of interlocking iron planks arranged in rows along the hull of the ship. Her sides curved in from the water towards the decks. It was hoped that this sloped armor would help protect the *Galena* by deflecting naval gunfire hitting from the side. However, this design would make her more vulnerable to plunging fire. This would prove both problematic and crucial when engaging the Confederate guns on the heights overlooking the James River.

USS Galena, 1862



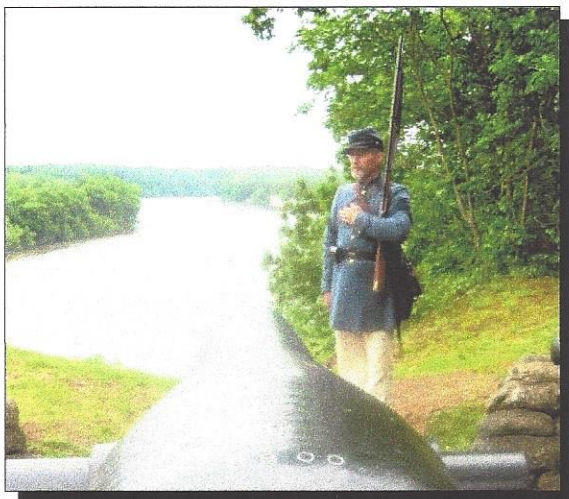
As the Federal squadron reached a narrow bend in the river about 8 miles south of Richmond they found their progress blocked by sunken vessels obstructing the river. They immediately encountered fire from heavy guns in earthwork positions on the heights called Drewry's Bluff, and small arms fire from rifle pits along the riverbank manned by Confederate Marines.

The Confederate perspective;

After the Confederates were forced to withdrawal from the Peninsula and the evacuate Norfolk during early May 1862, the shallow draught Southern naval vessels *Jamestown* and *Patrick Henry* retreated up the James River toward Richmond. The CSS *Virginia*, who's draught was too deep to negotiate the river's shoals, was abandoned and burned near Craney Island on 11 May. The smaller gunboats steamed up as far as Drewry's Bluff below Richmond.

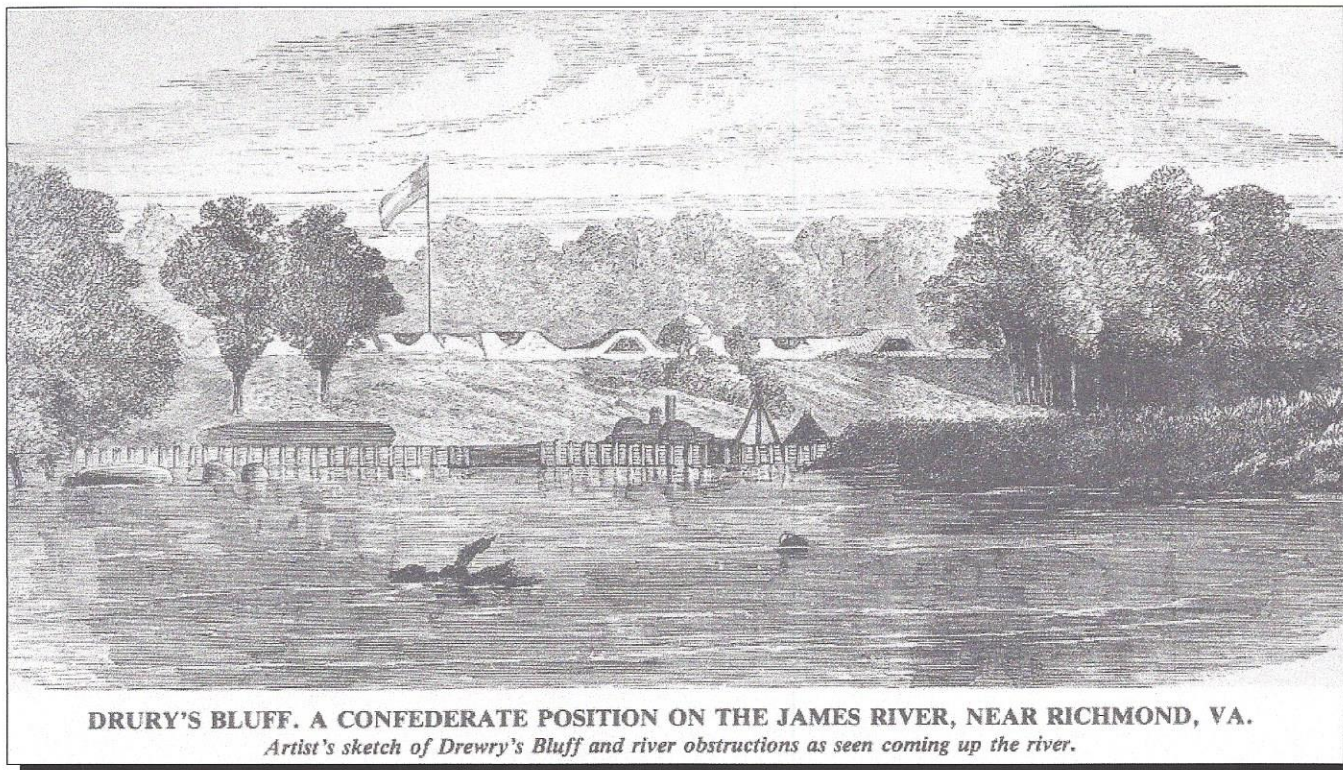
The Confederates were painfully aware of the vulnerability of Richmond via the river approach. At a point about 8 miles south of the city stood high bluffs overlooking a narrow bend in the river. It would be an ideal

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*



defensive position to deny access up the James. In March of 1862 preparing for such an attack the men of the Southside Artillery under Capt. Augustus Drewry (who was also the land owner of the bluffs) began construction on an earthen fortification, christened Fort Darling, with positions for heavy guns atop the 100 foot bluff. Two companies of Confederate Marines under overall command of Capt. John D. Simms, a former US Marine officer, were placed in rifle pits in the thick undergrowth along the bluffs to serve as sharpshooters. A few vessels, which had been commandeered under the orders of the Confederate States Navy Department and loaded with stone, were hurriedly sunk at the base of Drewry's Bluff blocking the narrow channel to stop any advancement of naval vessels up the river.

When the CSS *Jamestown* and *Patrick Henry* arrived from Hampton Roads the *Jamestown* was sunk in the channel to complete the river obstructions below the Bluff, blocking further passage north. The *Patrick Henry* would be moored, and her guns moved to the heights. The vessel would eventually house the Confederate Naval Academy until the evacuation of Richmond in April 1865. The guns and crews of these vessels were added to the earthwork defenses on the Bluffs. By 12 May the crew and armament of the scuttled *Virginia* had arrived in Richmond and were quickly sent to further bolster the Confederate forces at Drewry's Bluff. They would be almost immediately pressed into service with the arrival of the Federal naval squadron on 15 May. The combination of the river blockade and the defenses on the bluff would prove both an unexpected and unpleasant surprise for the US naval force coming up the James.



DRURY'S BLUFF. A CONFEDERATE POSITION ON THE JAMES RIVER, NEAR RICHMOND, VA.

Artist's sketch of Drewry's Bluff and river obstructions as seen coming up the river.

The Action on 15 May 1862;

Cmdr. John Rodgers' heavily armed Federal squadron, led by his flagship the USS *Galena*, steamed up the James, rounding the bend in the river just below Drewry's Bluff in the early morning of 15 May 1862. The *Galena's* armament consisted of four 9 inch Dahlgren guns, and two 100-pounder Parrot riles mounted to fire

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

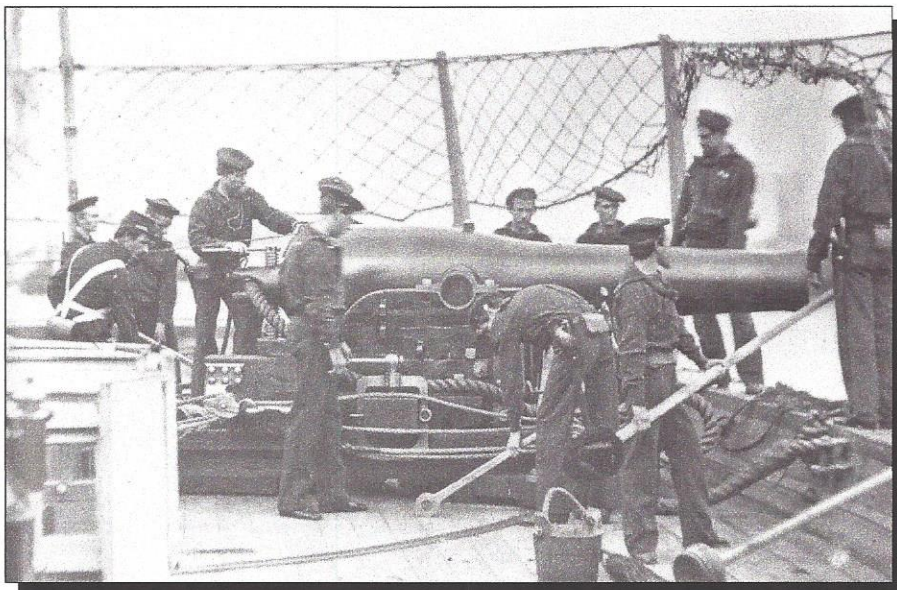
broadsides. The Monitor mounted two 11 inch smoothbore guns in a rotating turret. This firepower was reinforced by the heavy 100-pounders of the three gunboats. Along with their naval crews all five ships had a full compliment of US Marines.

At about 07:15 a.m., sighting the obstructions in the river, the *Galena* moved to within 500 yards of the bluff, dropped anchor, and prepared to open fire. But before Cmdr. Rodgers could give the order two Confederate rounds penetrated the vessel's inadequately armored hull, killing one sailor and wounding another five. At the same time southern Marines lining the banks of the river opened fire attempting to hit exposed members of the crews. A member of the Monitor's crew would later remark that "*the rifle balls of the sharpshooters pattered upon the decks like rain.*" The *Galena* quickly responded sending three giant projectiles toward the enemy positions.

Ironically, from the time the first shots were fired flaws in technology and hasty construction would plague both sides. On the bluff the Confederate defenders encountered several problems. A 10 inch Columbiad had recoiled so violently on its first shot that it broke its carriage and remained out of the fight until near the end of the engagement. An earthen casemate protecting one of the guns outside the Fort collapsed rendering that piece useless. Design flaws in the *Galena's* armor would prove devastatingly problematic throughout the engagement. When the Monitor moved up in support she quickly became a target. Her heavier armor withstood the blows, but unfortunately her guns could not elevate high enough to fire on the Confederate batteries over 100 feet above the river. The *Naugatuck* was forced to withdraw when her 100-pounder Parrot rifle exploded. The two other wooden gunboats remained safely out of range of the big guns but the Capt. of the *Port Royal*, along with other sailors, was wounded by sharpshooters on the shore, the ship's design providing inadequate cover from small arms fire. These failures would not diminish the ferocity of the action or the valor exhibited by both sides.

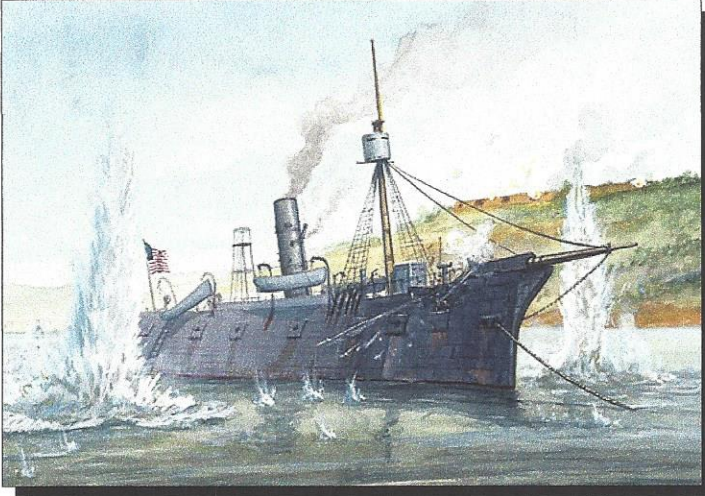
Galena's gunners quickly acquired the range of the Confederate positions and were able to repeatedly drive the southern crews from their guns, but only temporarily. The *Galena's* firepower and accuracy now made her a principle target for the Confederate heavy guns. Over the next three hours the *Galena* would be struck 43 times. Many of the shots smashed through her armor which proved ineffective for this type of plunging fire. Those rounds that did not penetrate showered the ship's interior with shivers and iron fragments from the fractured iron plating, wounding or killing numerous crewmen.

With the *Monitor* unable to elevate her guns, and the *Naugatuck's* gun out of action, that left only the gunboats *Port Royal* and *Aroostook* to support the *Galena*. Voluminous accurate rifle fire from the Confederate Marines on the river bank killed and wounded several crewmen on the unarmored decks eventually forcing both gunboats to retreat down river beyond the range of the sharpshooters, leaving the *Galena* to continue the fight alone.



While the *Galena's* naval gunners pounded the Confederate positions her Marine Guard, under the command of Orderly Sergeant Joseph Scarlett, laid down musket fire in an attempt to suppress the rifle fire from their southern counterparts on shore. As casualties mounted among the navy gunners it became necessary for the Marines to take the places of the fallen gunners, eventually leaving only Cpl. John Mackie and a twelve man detachment to continue the fire against the Confederate Marine sharpshooters.

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*



As the action continued the situation became increasingly grave for the Galena and her crew. The ship was severely damaged, ammunition was running low, and casualties were mounting. Both accurate fire from the Fort Darling guns and the muskets of the Confederate Marines continued to reek havoc. Cpl. Mackie would later describe the effects of the shelling;

The shells “*smashing every one of our six small boats, cutting up so many holes in the smokestack it reminded one of a nutmeg grinder, tearing great gaps in our spar deck and smashing all the spare spars. One shot struck the quarter deck wheel and binnacle, knocking them both overboard. The ship began to fly to pieces, and in a short time we were a*

complete wreck. As a gunner turned to go below an 8 inch solid shot pierced the port side killing him and four other men. instantly and wounding several. This was followed almost within a moment by another 8 inch solid shot hitting a little further forward, killing and wounding six men. After this shell came one which exploded on our deck, killing and wounding several men. Among these was the powder boy in the act of passing a cartridge.

Shortly after this another shell penetrated the hull near one of the 100-pounder Parrot rifles. Mackie recounted the effects;

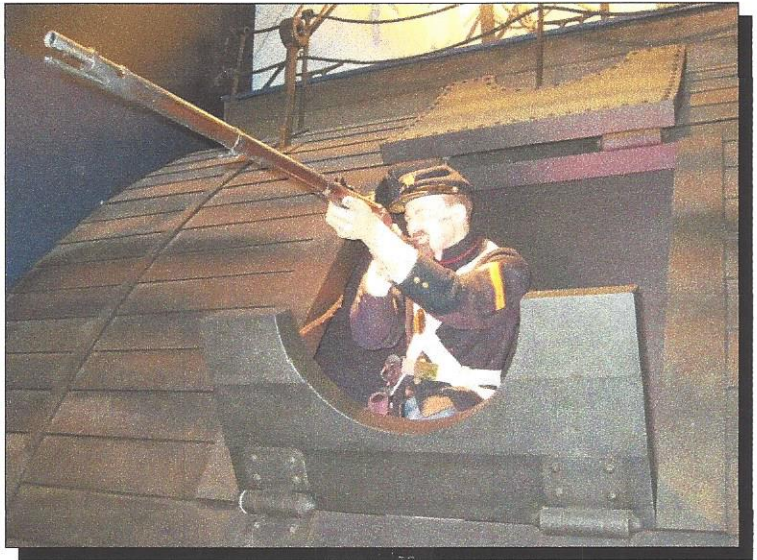
“*Twelve men of the Marine Guard under my command and I were at our ports, taking care of the sharpshooters on the opposite river bank, and I barely escaped being struck by the 10 inch shot. As soon as the smoke cleared away a terrible sight was revealed to my eyes: the entire after division down and the deck covered with dead and dying men..*”

Seeing this Mackie rushed to the carnage filled scene shouting, “*Come on, boys, here’s our chance for the Marines!*” The Marines removed the dead and wounded, cleared the debris, placed the gun back in action and continued to work the Parrot Rifle for the remainder of the battle.

Cpl. Mackie’s bravery and actions would epitomize the training and leadership of Marine NCOs throughout our history. Cmdr. Rodgers recounted Cpl. Mackie’s actions in an official report. It states in part:

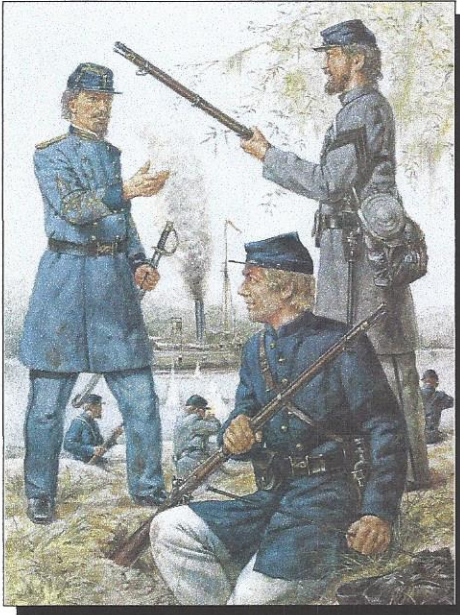
“*In the early part of the attack , he [Mackie] was a sharpshooter, toward the conclusion, a 10 inch shot having passed through the vessels side, killed and disabled nearly all the men at the left side tackle of the 100 Pdr. Parrot Rifle, Cpl. Mackie immediately applied himself to remove the bodies of the slain and wounded, and with a broom cleared the deck of fragments from armor, wood, &c, which impeded the movements of the gun. Then with the remainder of the Marine Guard, he assisted in loading and working the gun until the close of the battle. His conduct on board of this vessel has been entirely without reproval.*”

Commandant Harris promoted Mackie to the rank of Sergeant for “uniform good conduct and for gallantry in action,” and further endeavored to secure a medal for him. Ultimately Cpl. John Fremont Mackie, would be awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Drewry’s Bluff, becoming the first in a lone line of Marines to receive that distinction.



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

After the battle the officer commanding the Confederate States Marines, Capt. John D. Simms, CSMC, would praise his men in a report to the Confederate Marine Commandant, Col. Loyd J. Beall;



Colonel,
 I have the honor to make to you the following report. On the 15th inst. the enemy's gunboats having made their appearance near the battery at Drewry's Bluff, I stationed my command on the bluffs some two hundred yards from them to act as sharpshooters. We immediately opened a sharp fire upon them, killing three of the crew of the Galena certainly, and no doubt many more. The fire of the enemy was materially silenced at intervals by the fire of our troops.
 It gives me much pleasure to call your attention to the coolness of the officers and men under the severe fire of the enemy. The companies comprising my battalion were commanded by Capts. Van Benthuyssen and Meiere.

Very Respectfully
 Jno. D. Simms
 Capt. C.S. Marines
 Commd'g.

By 11:00 a.m. The CSS *Patrick Henry* joined the fight, firing on the *Galena* from above the river obstructions. One of her shells exploded on *Galena's* gun deck killing three more men and wounding many others. After four hours of continuous fighting Cmdr. Rodgers, his ammunition nearly exhausted, his ship battered, and over half his crew casualties gave the signal to discontinue the action and the squadron to withdraw. A visitor to the ship would later write that the *Galena* "looked like a slaughter house after the battle."

Confederate tenacity and determination had blunted the union advance just eight miles short of the Confederate capital. Richmond would not again be threatened from the river approach.

