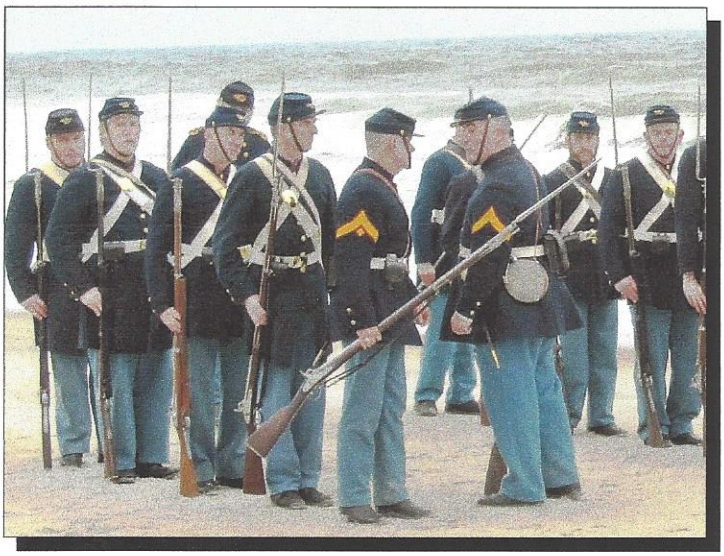
"Into the Hurricane of Fire"
The U.S. Marines and the Assault on Fort Fisher, 15 January 1865

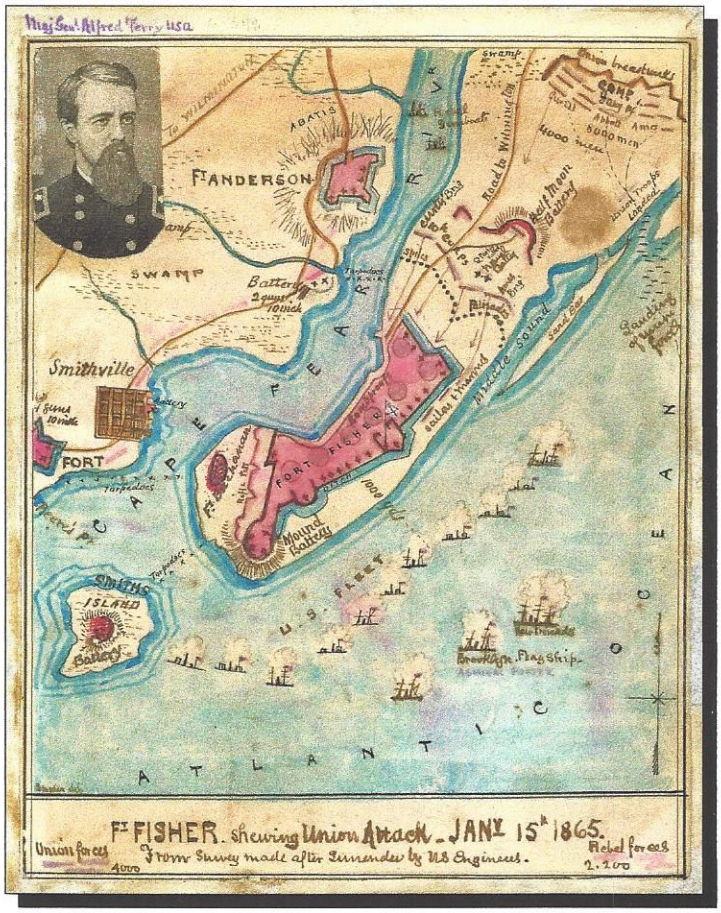


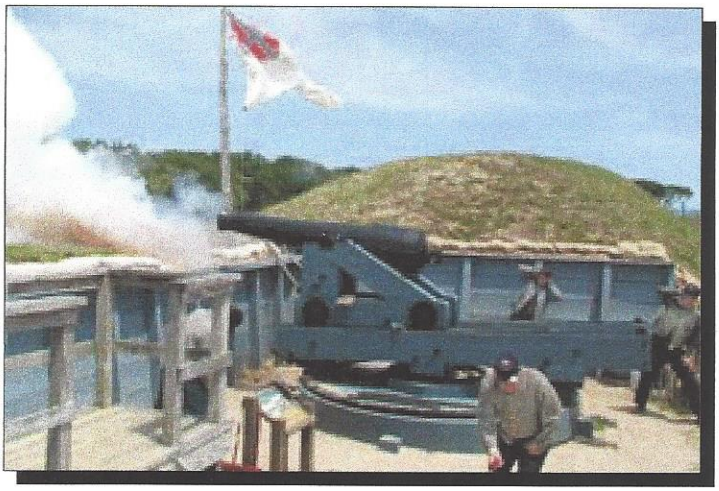
Modern Active Duty and Retired Marines from the USMC's Historical Company recreate a detachment of Civil War era Marines at Fort Fisher Historical Site.

Often in the study of history we tend to look at things in a simplified "black and white" view. In reality history is many varying shades of gray, made up of many varying points of view. So goes the many accounts of the actions to take Fort Fisher in 1865. A moment in Marine Corps history that is often overlooked or misinterpreted is the involvement of the U.S. Marines at the Second Battle of Fort Fisher, NC, near the end of the American Civil War.

Much has been written about the battle's grand strategies, the achievements and the blunders, but little has focused on those nameless souls in the ranks, whose courage and actions ultimately determine whether engagements are won or lost. A number of those souls that entered into that hurricane of fire assaulting Fort Fisher were United States Marines. Considered by some to be one of the less then shining moments in our Corps' history, upon a closer examination, the accomplishments of those Marines were, under the circumstances, extraordinary. Although the ill-fated attack by the Naval Brigade was considered flawed and poorly conceived, drawing tremendous controversy after the battle, the ethos, courage, discipline, and leadership demonstrated by those 400 Marines attached to the Naval Brigade in the assault can be compared with those at Bladensburg, MD during the War of 1812, and at Chosin, Korea a century later. Their conduct and actions would reflect the very foundation upon which our Corps is built. What follows is a brief thumbnail sketch of those actions from the perspective of the Marines.

By the end of 1864 Wilmington, North Carolina, would be the Confederacy's only remaining open port on the Atlantic coast. The city stood ten miles from the sea on the east bank of the Cape Fear River, the entrance to which was defended by formidable earthworks named Fort Fisher. Located near the tip of a peninsula curling down from the north about 20 miles from the city, the fort was built in the shape of an inverted L. The base of the L bisected the peninsula, a distance of approximately half a mile, and was called the land face. The upstroke of the L, called the sea face, extended for more than a mile along the eastern shore and mounted 24 guns in similar redoubts. About 50 feet in front of the land face the peninsula was again bisected by a palisade of sharp pointed logs, and some 500 feet advance of that the defenders had laid a field of electrically detonated mines. At the southern tip of the peninsula at a landing on the west (river) side was Battery Buchanan, a detached work armed with four guns manned by naval personnel. Its purpose was to prevent any vessels from entering the river to attack the fort from the rear and,





Interpreters at Fort Fisher North Carolina State Historic Site fire a 32-pounder like those originally mounted in the forts defenses. ***Photo courtesy Fort Fisher State Park.***

should the fort fall, to serve as a strong point to which the Garrison could retreat and from which it might be evacuated. The total strength of the Fort's garrison by the beginning of the January 1865 assault was approximately 1,500 men, including seventy-some Confederate Marines.

On 23 December 1864, in a first attempt to close the port, a Union naval squadron commanded by Rear Adm. David Dixon Porter subjected the fort to a day and a half of heavy, but not especially accurate, fire. Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler's Army force landed that second afternoon (Christmas Eve). The Marines attached to Porter's North Atlantic blockading squadron did not participate in this first landing and would watch the first abortive attack from shipboard. Butler sent only half of his 6,500 man Army force ashore to assault the land face of the fort. They were immediately stalled by the mine field and heavy fire from the fort. Belatedly, the union commanders, after closer observation now concluded - probably with good reason - that despite a day and a half of shelling the fort's defenses had not been damaged enough for an assault to succeed. On 26 December Adm. Porter sent boats to evacuate the federal troops. Upon their return the fleet withdrew.

Undeterred by the first bungled military operation, Union leaders started planning for a second Fort Fisher expedition. However, not before some changes were made. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who never had confidence in Butler's abilities, promptly replaced him with Maj. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, and increased the Army force to 8,500 men. Adm. Porter retained his command and was ordered to prepare his fleet for another try. What followed would become the greatest amphibious assault of the Civil War.

The Union armada appeared in site of Fort Fisher late on 12 January 1865. The fleet opened fire and this time the ship's gunners proved much more accurate. By 1500 (3 p.m.) on the 15 January, the hour chosen for the assault, all except one of the guns in Fort Fisher's land face had been silenced, the underground wires to the minefield severed, and gaps opened in the palisade.

Gen. Terry intended to make the assault with all of his 8,500 men, which had been drawn from the U.S. Army's 24th Corps. Porter, not content to just pummel the fort with his guns, wanted a larger piece of the action. He formed a naval brigade composed of 1,600 sailors and 400 Marines which he proposed to conduct a landing and attack against "the sea face" of Fort Fisher.

The Union's plan would now incorporate simultaneous assaults to be made upon both ends of the fort's land face. The western attack along the riverbank would be delivered by Terry's Army infantry; the eastern attack along the seashore would be conducted by Porter's naval brigade and would concentrate on the junction between the landward bastions and sea face of the fort. These attacks would be proceeded by an extensive naval bombardment. (see Map A)

The Naval Brigade, under the overall command of Cdr. Kidder R. Breese (Porter's Chief of Staff), was organized into three divisions of sailors led by the ship's officers and an improvised battalion of 400 Marines drawn from the various ships' detachments. The Marines, under Capt. Lucian L. Dawson, the senior Marine officer of the squadron, were to go ashore and deploy as sharpshooters. They were armed primarily with the M1855 and M1861 muzzle-loading rifle muskets with a few Spencer seven shot repeating rifles issued to the Marine detachment from the screw sloop USS *Ticonderoga.* The sailors were however, for the most part armed only with pistols and cutlasses.

Marines and sailors of Adm. Porter's Naval Brigade man boats for the amphibious assault against the sea face of Fort Fisher. ***Painting by Col. Charles Waterhouse, USMC (Ret).***

Per Breese's instructions to Capt. Dawson: the Marines were to advance by stages to occupy three successive lines of rifle pits to be dug by naval working parties, the last only 200 yards from the fort. In this position they would provide covering fire for the naval divisions. Upon the order to attack, the sailors would charge through the Marines and, as Porter quaintly put it, *"board the fort on the run in a seaman-like way."* Once the sailors had passed, the Marines were to follow.

The plan contained several, now obvious, flaws. It compelled both the Marines and sailors coming from a number of different ships without time to organize and train together, land under fire, and form into a cohesive combat force. Further, timing was crucial. Coordination of the naval assault with the Army would prove critical.

Regardless, the Marines and bluejackets from ships across the fleet loaded into long boats and landed on the neck of the peninsula northeast of Fort Fisher. Once the brigade was in position, at a prearranged signal of every steam whistle in the squadron screaming in unison, Porter's ships would cease-fire.

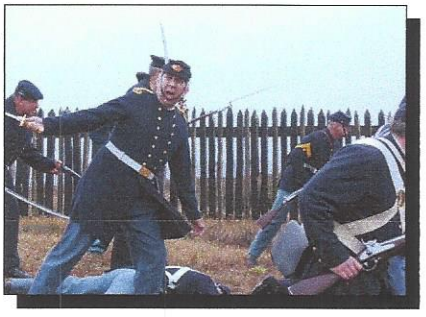
Things began to go wrong almost at once. Capt. Dawson was still in the process of sorting out his Marine Battalion when Cdr. Breese ordered him to bring it to the front. The Marines had scarcely reached the second line of rifle pits when a new order arrived. Breese had discovered that the incline where the beach sloped down to the sea furnished "splendid cover," and ordered Dawson to move his Marines there. Soon the entire brigade was lying in a long column beside the water's edge with the Leathernecks abreast and inland of the second naval division. The next order Dawson heard was the shout "Charge! Charge!"

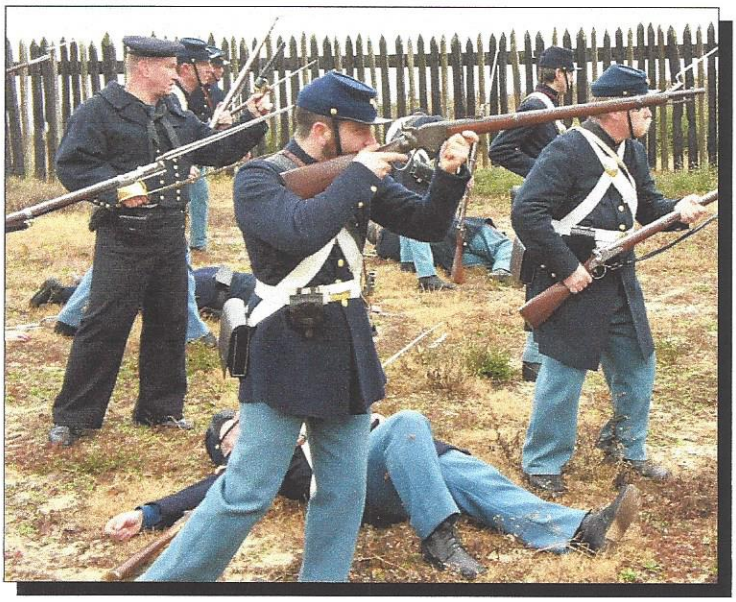
With a cheer the naval brigade sprang up and dashed toward the fort some 600 yards away, screaming and yelling so loudly that no order from any of the officers could be heard. Intense musket fire from the riflemen on the fort's parapet halted the head of the column 50 yards short of its goal. However, a few sturdy souls managed to get inside the palisade. Most of their comrades threw themselves to the ground, where, in the words of an officer present, *"they were packed like sheep in a pen while the enemy was crowding the ramparts... and shooting into them as fast as they could fire."* Capt. Dawson had just caught up to his leading company when the sailors broke to the rear, reeling back in an "every man for himself" retreat. Cpl. Henry B. Hallowell, a member of the Marine Guard from the USS *Juniata*, recalled:

Seen from the Confederate perspective the Naval Brigade attempts to break through the palisade in their ill-fated assault. ***1887 Painting by J.O. Davidson, Library of Congress collection.***

"The guns from the fort poured grape and canister into us, cutting us to pieces. A few managed to crawl to the base of the fort. Others tried to retreat, but this was made impossible by barrage being thrown over our heads from the front to prevent retreating. We were in a pretty fix, with the fort raking our ranks from the front and the shells exploding in our rear. History states that we entrenched ourselves. The only entrenching we did was to hug the ground and dig with our noses and toes".

Seeing panic spread throughout the column and trying to carry out his part in the assault, Dawson shouted to the Marines to lie down and fire at the parapet. Most of his men in the first two companies obeyed, but many of those in the last two, unable to hear his orders, joined the stampede. As soon as the brigade was out of range of the Confederate guns he ordered the men that had stayed with him to retire by squads. Dawson himself and a number of officers remained outside the fort until nightfall.





The naval assault had, despite its repulse, achieved a positive, although unintended, result. The Army's attack had been delayed, and the Confederates had diverted most of its defenders to repulse the naval assault, leaving only about 250 men to hold the western land face. Furthermore, the attack preoccupied the attention of both the fort's commander, Col. William Lamb, and his superior officer, MajGen. Whiting, the Wilmington District Commander, who had felt honor bound to join the fort's garrison. Thus, glancing at the opposite end of the land face after the naval brigade had been beaten off; the Confederate commanders were astonished to see three Union flags wavering over it.

Calling on the men nearby to follow, Whiting rushed along the parapet toward the enemy. Although he would go down with mortal wounds, his charge would check the federal Army's advance. For the next five hours Fort Fisher would see some of the most intense combat of the war. Federal soldiers, along with a further force of 180 Marines, would fight hand-to-hand through the traverses between the land-face gun chambers.

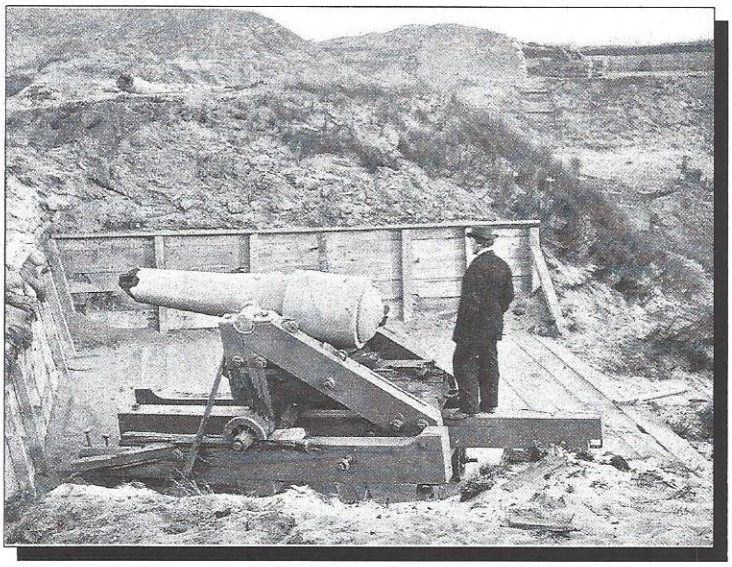
Around 2100 (9 p.m.), the arrival of a fresh Union brigade caused the defense to finally crumble. The remainder of the Confederate garrison evacuated the fort and fell back to Battery Buchanan. Upon their arrival however, they found that the Battery's commander had already spiked the guns and withdrawn its men taking everything that could float. Fisher's defenders had been abandoned to their fate.

All told the Union naval brigade suffered 351 casualties, among them 57 Marines: 16 killed or missing and 41 wounded. The Marines had distinguished themselves well during the action. Capt. Dawson and seven of his officers would earn brevets for gallantry, and six enlisted Marines would receive the Medal of Honor for their actions. Orderly Sgt. Isaac N. Fry and Sgt. Richard Binder, from the USS *Ticonderoga,* received the award for the manner in which they commanded ship's guns during the bombardment of the fort; Cpl. Andrew J. Tomlin of the USS *Wabash,* shouldered a wounded comrade and carried him to safety during the land attack with the Army; Cpl. John Rannahan, and Pvts. John Shivers and Henry Thompson from the USS *Minnesota* Marine Guard, advanced further than any other Marines within their detachment. Lt.Cdr. James H. Parker, commanding the shore party from that vessel, remarked "*Thompson got nearer to fort than any one from our ship by a few yards. They [all] deserve promotion and medals.*"

However those honors were overshadowed. The Navy appeared more interested in assigning fault. In the immediate aftermath of the attack Cdr. Breese ungracefully affixed the blame for the naval brigade's rout on the absence of the Marines from their [assigned] position. Although Breese graciously added that he attributed their failure to insufficient time to organize "*so many small squads of men from the different vessels*" and "*not... to any want of personal valor.*" Capt. Dawson's own detailed reports make clear where the failure really lay.

Unfortunately most Navy officers took Breese's view thereby creating a point of dissension that would trouble Navy-Marine Corps relations for the next 30 years. Some naval officers even questioned the continued usefulness of the Corps as an independent force. The fundamental error, as the leader of one of the naval divisions commented years later, "*was expecting a body of sailors, collected hastily from different ships, armed with swords and pistols, to stand against veteran soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets.*" Future admiral George Dewey, who watched the assault from the deck of his ship, summed it up nicely: "*Such an attempt was sheer, murderous madness.*"

The capture of Fort Fisher would finally complete the amphibious agenda of the "Anaconda Plan"



This period photograph taken by Timothy O'Sullivan in February 1865 shows the devastation to the fort in the aftermath of the battle. The gun in the foreground is as rifled 32-pounder who's barrel suffered catastrophic failure during the battle due to overheating and possible casting flaws.

implemented in 1861. As of 16 January 1865, the eastern Confederacy was isolated from the world beyond. Although ships' guards continued to serve in naval blockaders off the Southern coast and participated in the capture of the city of Mobile, for the U.S. Marines the war was all but over. The assault on Fort Fisher would be the final major action by the United States Marine Corps in the American Civil War.

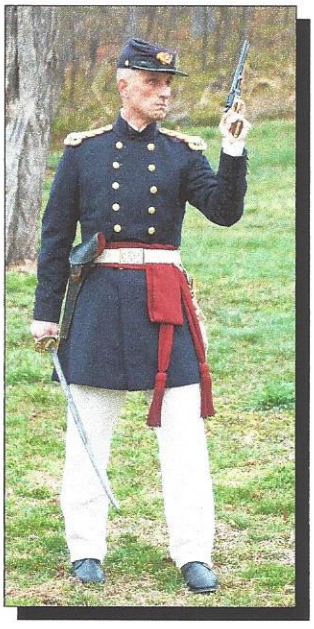
Within a few months after Fort Fisher the war was over. The Corps had expanded to a modest peak strength of 4,167 officers and men, and had lost 148 killed in action or died of wounds, 131 wounded, and 108 captured; another 257 died from other causes. There had been decisive and valiant moments and the glimmerings of proper amphibious usage, but overall, politics and poor senior management had gained the Corps little in the way of reputation. In 1866 the House of Representatives again considered abolishing the Marine Corps or transferring its functions to the Army. After extensive debate and a long line of witnesses, the Committee on Naval Affairs reported in 1867 that "*No good reason appears either for abolishing the Marine Corps, or transferring it to the Army.*" However, the thought did not go away and would stifle the growth and development of the Corps through the latter part of the 19th century until the beginning of America's war with Spain.

The amphibious operations against Fort Fisher have had, in many ways, a direct impact on the shaping of the Marine Corps today. Although the 1865 assault foreshadowed the massive amphibious operations that would take place in the 20th century, recriminations and the placing of blame took precedence over the heroism of those Marines and the lessons that could have been learned. If the time spent in charges and counter charges had been used instead for careful analysis, Fort Fisher might have yielded all the lessons, negative and positive, required as a basis for modern amphibious doctrine. The requirement for a single, not divided command; the folly of last-minute "provisional" landing force organizations; the need for adequate ship-to-shore communications; and the value of properly applied naval gunfire, were all demonstrated to the quarreling participants had only they taken the time to review at them. Their study could have led to the development of plans for organized large scale landing operations and even the establishment of the Fleet Marine Forces much earlier in Navy-Marine Corps history, possibly altering the course of both the Marine Corps and even world events.

U.S. Marine M1859 Undress Uniform *During the American Civil War Era*

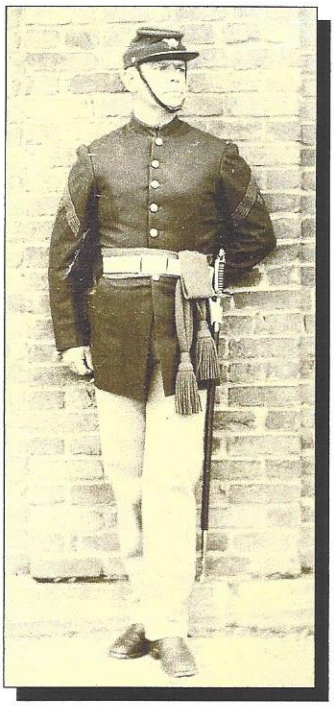
Just prior to the American Civil War the Marine Corps implemented a major uniform design change. Closely following French fashion, the new uniform regulations would prescribe variations of the dark blue wool coat, and sky blue wool (or white linen in warm weather) trousers for all levels of uniform. The undress uniform, a new level of dress for the enlisted ranks, would fill the gap for general service and duty. The "dress" uniform would now be reserved for more formal occasions.

The undress uniform consisted of a dark blue wool fatigue cap, or "kepi," with a brass hunting horn infantry



Lieutenant of Marines, 1859 Undress

Private of Marines, 1859 Undress



These pictures, taken utilizing 19th century photographic equipment, shows an Orderly or First Sergeant (left) and Private (right) in the M1859 enlisted undress uniform. The sergeant's rank is indicated by a red worsted wool sash around the waist, and three red backed yellow chevrons on each upper sleeve with a separate one inch lozenge underneath. He is armed with the new M1859 sword authorized for sergeants. The Private wears the Marine white buff cross belts in use throughout the war and carries an 1842 Musket.

It should be noted that, because this photo was taken with period equipment, the image would normally be reversed. However it has been corrected to show proper location of equipment.

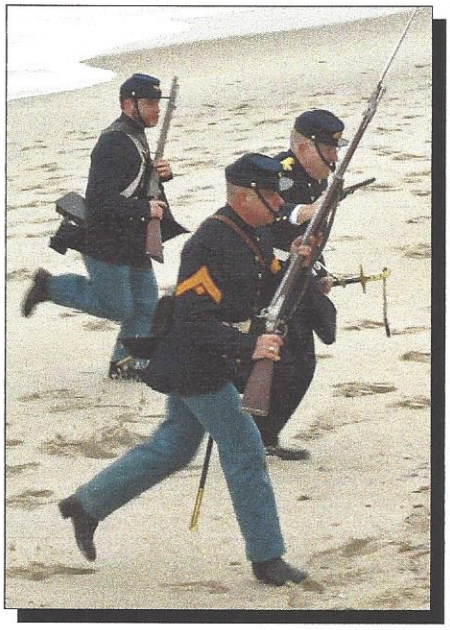
badge on front. The badge contained a red backed silver 'M' in its center. The officer's version of this fatigue cap would be the first to officially bear a quatrefoil on it's top.

The enlisted undress coat was a single breasted frock design of dark indigo blue kersey wool. It had a standup collar welted in red at its base, seven large Marine buttons down the front, and two small Marine buttons on each cuff. Officers would wear a untrimmed double breasted version of this coat. Although the 1859 uniform regulations specify a shirt of dark blue wool flannel for normal wear, during hot weather an un-died muslin shirt was prescribed to be worn under the coat.

The normal service trousers were of sky blue wool. Line Officers and Senior Staff NCOs (i.e. Sergeant Major and Quartermaster Sergeant) were authorized a narrow red welt down each leg, with all others being plain. During warm weather plain white linen trousers were authorized for all ranks.

The shoes were a standard smooth black leather military Jefferson Boot often referred to as 'brogans.' There is indication that 12 inch pull on ankle boot was also utilized by the Marines. Although the 1859 regulations called for new "French pattern" equipment specifying that both the cartridge box and bayonet to be worn on the waist belt, the white buff leather cross belts, with the exception of sergeants, continued in use through most of the Civil War. However, by the end of the war the cross belts were giving way to wearing the bayonet on the waist belt.

The Marine Corps had accepted the M1855 rifled musket for use in the late 1850's. But at the beginning of the Civil War many Marines were still being issued the M1842 smooth bore musket. By 1863 the most common in use was the M1861 Springfield rifled musket. Muzzle loaders would stay standard for the Corps until the early 1870's. For service ashore the Marine Corps issued equipment, such as the haversack and canteen, the same as that used by the US Army.



Left:
An Orderly Sergeant, captain, and Private of Marines as they would have appeared as part of the 400 Marines that engaged in the assault on Fort Fisher in January 1865.

The undress uniform would have been common to Marines serving aboard the Atlantic blockade fleet, as well as postings to Navy yards, and coastal gun emplacements. The 1859 uniform, in it variations, would gain distinction throughout the Civil War and would continue to serve through 1871 when, after Koreans had fired on American Citizens, the Marines, as part of a naval brigade, would once again conduct an amphibious landing against forts on the banks of the Salee River near Inchon.

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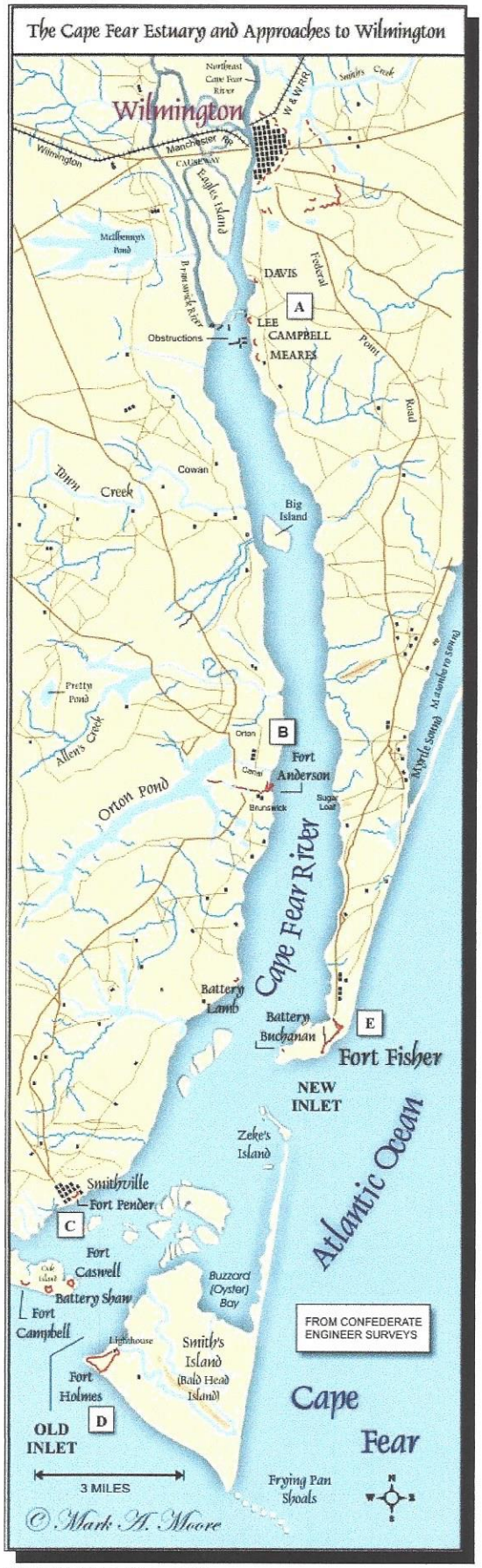
Map A (below) shows the disposition of Admiral Porter's fleet and the approach routes of the Army and Naval Columns. Also indicated are the relevant distances (ranges) from the forts guns.



Map B (left) illustrates the relationship of Fort Fisher to the port city of Wilmington, and the fort's strategic importance in the defense of the cities river approaches. ***Map courtesy Fort Fisher State Park.***

Map C (below) shows details of the approach and assault of both the Army and Naval Columns, along with details of the Fort's armament. ***Map courtesy Fort Fisher State Park.***