

## **Fort Hatteras Captured** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Since the humiliating rout at Manassas a month before, the giddy confidence of many in the North had been replaced by gloomy acceptance that this would be a real war. Abraham Lincoln and the Northern public were anxious for some good news in the growing conflict. In late August, 1861, Union forces finally achieved their first significant victory of the Civil War.

The barrier islands of North Carolina were strategically important as they provided protection to the Albemarle Sound and a number of important North Carolina coastal cities. Perhaps more importantly, they provided protection for Confederate raiders who would pounce upon merchant ships riding the Gulf Stream from the Caribbean to northern cities. Ships could slip quickly out of Hatteras Inlet, between Hatteras Island and Ocracoke Island, raid a merchant ship and then scurry back to the safety of the Carolina sounds. These waters had long been known for this sort of activity, dating back to the pirate Blackbeard in the early 1700s.

Shortly after secession, North Carolina authorities quickly constructed two rudimentary forts at Hatteras Inlet. Fort Clark had five small guns and was located near the inlet itself. Fort Hatteras had ten guns and was situated a half mile farther back toward the sound side of Hatteras Island. None of the guns in either fort was large enough to be suitable for coastal defense.

As the number of merchant ships attacked grew during 1861, there was pressure in Washington to do something about it. Naval officials realized that if the forts at Hatteras Inlet were captured, they would not only stop the raiding of merchant ships but would also effectively blockade the North Carolina cities on the sounds from receiving supplies by sea. In addition,

securing eastern North Carolina waters would provide a back door way to attack Confederate forces currently holding Tidewater Virginia.

However, naval forces could not capture the forts alone. Thus, the situation at Hatteras Inlet gave rise to the first amphibious operation combining U.S. Naval and Army forces. On August 26, 1861 the Union forces left Fortress Monroe in Virginia. The Army forces, numbering about 880 men, were under the command of Major General Benjamin Butler and carried in two large boats. The seven naval gunships were commanded by Flag Officer Silas Stringham. The fleet arrived off the Outer Banks the next day and anchored in site of the Confederate garrison, which numbered less than 600 men.

The next morning the Union gunships began pounding the two forts in a novel way, at least for American forces. Each boat would pass in front of the fort while firing and then move away to reload. This technique, learned from the British and French in the Crimean War, prevented the defenders from being able to adjust their aim on each ship. By mid-day, Fort Clark was badly damaged and abandoned and the defenders there fled to Fort Hatteras.

Meanwhile, the first U.S. amphibious landing was a mixed success. Attempting to land in small boats about three miles north of the forts, only about a third of the soldiers were able to land before high winds and surf forced Butler to suspend the landing. The men who did make it ashore camped out overnight to await events of the next day.

As August 29 dawned, the Union warships began to pound Fort Hatteras again. The defenders guns continued to have no effect on the ships and by 11:00 am the defenders sent up the white flag. Though there were very few casualties in the battle, almost 700 Confederates found themselves prisoners and being shipped to camps in New York. Fort Hatteras had been

reinforced with about 100 additional men overnight, all of whom found themselves captured hours after they arrived. The capture of the inlets put an end to Confederate raiding in the area and provided a launching point for Union forces to capture and occupy eastern North Carolina the following spring.