

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of New Bern, North Carolina, March 14, 1862

By **Richard A. Sauer**

As part of his grand strategy for defeating the Confederacy, Major General George Brinton McClellan, the northern commander in chief, arranged for a number of expeditions to harass the fringes of the Southern states that would force the Confederacy to send troops to confront these expeditions, thus weakening the main field army in Virginia and making it easier for McClellan to attack in the spring and summer of 1862.

One such expedition was placed under the command of Brigadier General Ambrose Everett Burnside, a West Point graduate who had remained in the regular army until 1852, when he resigned and created an arms company that manufactured his own invention, the Burnside carbine. The company went bankrupt, after which McClellan offered his friend a position with a railroad company he worked for. In 1861, Burnside commanded a brigade at the Battle of First Manassas, after which, in spite of his lackluster battlefield performance, Burnside was promoted to brigadier general and was training troops in the Washington, DC, area when McClellan tasked him with preparing an expedition.

McClellan instructed Burnside that his troops, which assembled at Annapolis, Maryland, during the late fall and winter of 1861, would be sent to Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina, where the Federals had established a base in August 1861. From there, Burnside was instructed to attack and capture Roanoke Island, where the Confederates had a fortified base. Burnside was then to attack the city of New Bern, then move south to occupy Beaufort harbor and capture Fort Macon. Once these objectives had been accomplished, Burnside would be in a position to advance inland toward strategic railroads that supplied the Confederate forces in Virginia.

Burnside assembled a Coast Division of about 15,000 soldiers, accompanied by an army-led flotilla of wooden gunboats and supply ships. Cooperating with Burnside were vessels of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, under the command of Flag Officer Louis Malesherbes Goldsborough. The division left Annapolis in early January 1862, only to encounter two severe northeasters that struck the coast and caused severe damage to many ships. In spite of the weather, the division managed to get across the sandbars at Hatteras Inlet and moved to attack Roanoke Island. The resulting battle on

February 6-7 was a major Union victory. Burnside's men captured the island and almost 2,500 Southerners. Union naval vessels pursued the retreating Confederate North Carolina Squadron and destroyed it at Elizabeth City on February 10.¹

With the Yankees in control of much of the state's inland sounds, Governor Henry Toole Clark pestered the Confederate government for reinforcements. However, few were forthcoming because the high command thought that Burnside would attack the port of Norfolk from the south and thus concentrated troops to defend that city. The Confederate commander in North Carolina, Brigadier General Richard Caswell Gatlin, felt that Burnside would move next against New Bern, the state's second-largest city with a population of almost 5,500 people. Some officers thought that Burnside would attack the port of Wilmington instead of New Bern, so the available troops were divided between the two cities.

New Bern is situated where the Trent and Neuse Rivers come together and was the headquarters of the District of the Pamlico, under the command of Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch. Earthwork forts had been erected in 1861 on the west bank of the Neuse River to repel any Union warships that might steam up the river, and after Branch took command, his men, assisted by conscripted black slaves, worked to strengthen and expand the defenses. Thirteen miles below New Bern was Slocum's Creek (site of a modern Marine Corps base), a likely landing point for the Yankees. A couple of miles north of this creek, Branch's men erected the Croatan breastworks (named after nearby Croatan Sound), a line of defenses which would force the Yankees into a frontal assault because an impassible swamp protected the western end of this line. Five miles north of the Croatan line was a four-gun fort called Fort Dixie. A mile north of Fort Dixie was the main Confederate line of defensive earthworks. Fort Thompson, mounting 14 cannon, anchored this line, which ran a mile west to the Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad. Beyond the railroad the flat terrain gave way to small hills with swampy bogs in between. Two smaller forts guarded the river in the four miles between Fort Thompson and New Bern itself.

Burnside left Roanoke Island on March 11 with around 11,000 troops. Captain Stephen Clegg Rowan brought thirteen navy gunboats to protect the troopships and bombard the enemy defenses. The Union soldiers disembarked from their vessels on the morning of March 13 at Slocum's Creek. In spite of warnings from civilians who watched the Union ships steam up the Neuse River, Branch was not quick enough to send troops to man the Croatan line, which was occupied by Burnside's men without resistance. Branch abandoned Fort Dixie and concentrated his men behind the Fort Thompson line as the Yankees marched toward New Bern, delayed by rain that lasted much of the day and turned the dirt roads to mud.

¹ The original intent was to recruit regiments in which there would be a number of men with seafaring experience, but in reality, very few units had soldiers with such experience and so the theory was not put into practice.

Branch had around 4,000 soldiers to oppose Burnside. Aware that the Yankees were heading toward New Bern, troops from Wilmington and from points in South Carolina were sent to reinforce Branch but they did not arrive in time for the battle.

From left to right, commencing at the river, the Confederate line consisted of Fort Thompson, then the 27th, 37th, 7th, and 35th North Carolina regiments, with a militia battalion at the railroad. Two companies of heavy artillery were armed as infantry and stationed with the infantry behind the breastworks. Another artillery company was in the process of placing two cannons on the railroad itself even as the battle opened on March 14. Ten cannon from two light artillery batteries added their firepower to the infantry. West of the railroad, the 26th North Carolina was instructed to erect small forts on the hillocks sticking out of the swampy terrain. This regiment was reinforced by two cannon, two companies of cavalry, and an independent infantry company. Branch had one regiment—the 33rd North Carolina—held in reserve, along with most of the 2nd North Carolina Cavalry.

Burnside's troops were divided into three brigades, led by Brigadier Generals John Gray Foster, Jesse Lee Reno, and John Grubb Parke. Well aware of the Confederate defenses (Northern sympathizers in New Bern were in communication with Burnside), Burnside decided to deploy Foster's First Brigade (23rd, 24th, 25th, 27th Massachusetts, 10th Connecticut) to launch a frontal assault on the Confederate line. Reno's Second Brigade (21st Massachusetts, 9th New Jersey, 51st New York, 51st Pennsylvania) was to move up along the railroad and attempt to outflank the Rebel line at the railroad. Parke's Third Brigade (4th and 5th Rhode Island, 8th and 11th Connecticut) were to be held in reserve and used as needed. Eight light cannon from the army transports accompanied the troops and were ordered to support Foster's attack.

The first shots of the battle were fired around 7:30 a.m. on March 14, 1862 when Foster's troops emerged from the woods in front of the Confederate line and opened fire, as the morning fog waned. Captain Rowan's warships added their firepower but remained downstream from Fort Thompson, wary of rows of sharpened stakes in the river that had been placed there to prevent enemy ships from moving upstream. Branch's men returned fire; the heavy volume of musketry and cannon prevented Foster's men from making any headway as both sides settled down to firing on each other.

Meanwhile, Reno's troops advanced along the railroad. The 21st Massachusetts, in the lead, fired on the artillery company trying to place two cannon on the rail line and drove them off. The 21st then fired on the militia battalion, which panicked and fled from the battle, followed by elements of the 35th North Carolina. The remainder of this regiment, reinforced by part of the 37th North Carolina, drove the 21st Massachusetts back. As Reno personally surveyed the situation and decided to bring the rest of his brigade forward, men of the 26th North Carolina saw the general and opened fire. Surprised, Reno ordered the rest of his brigade to deploy in the swampy woods west of the railroad to confront the Confederates there.

As Reno's men faced the 26th North Carolina, Branch sent forward his reserve regiment (33rd North Carolina) to both reinforce the 26th and plug the gap in the line made when the militia retreated. By the time the 33rd had moved forward, Parke's Third Brigade moved up along the railroad. The 11th Connecticut had been sent to reinforce Foster's stalled attack, but Parke's remaining three regiments moved forward and exploited the confusion caused by the initial attack of the 21st Massachusetts. Against light opposition, Parke's men broke into the center of the Confederate line and forced Branch, who had already sent his reserve unit forward, to order a general retreat.

As the Confederate fire slackened, Foster's regiments surged forward and occupied the line of breastworks as the enemy retreated. Beyond the railroad, the 26th and 33rd North Carolina regiments did not receive the order to retreat and were almost cut off before their officers were able to realize their situation and retreat. Also sensing the absence of organized resistance, Captain Rowan ordered his ship captains to force their way through the river obstacles and make their way upstream toward New Bern. Suffering no significant damage as they rammed their way through the spikes, Rowan's ships headed upriver toward New Bern. Individual ships dropped out of the race and landed sailors to take possession of the abandoned Confederate river forts, while some vessels reached New Bern and landed detachments of sailors to assist the citizens to put out fires that had been set by retreating troops to burn military stores in the city.

Branch had intended to rally his troops to protect New Bern, but the rapid pace of the naval vessels forced him to order a retreat inland to Kinston. Confederate casualties totaled 68 killed, 116 wounded, and 425 captured or missing, for a total of 609. Only two cannon were saved, and the soldiers lost all their equipment and their camps. Burnside's troops had suffered a loss of 90 killed, 385 wounded, and a single man captured, for a total of 476. Burnside captured North Carolina's second largest city, which the Union would occupy for the rest of the war. Because of its location, Union-occupied New Bern would always pose a threat to the railroads further inland, forcing the Confederacy to leave a number of troops to defend the state against any sudden Union advance inland.
