

BATTLE OF SANTA ROSA ISLAND

W. J. Mimer

W. J. Mimer, of Birmingham, gives an interesting account of the battle of Santa Rosa Island, October 7, 8, 1861.

From a term of service as a Confederate soldier extending over a period of nearly four years, the following narrative of personal experience is selected, not because of the importance of the battle, but for the purpose of illustrating the spirit of patriotism, courage, and devotion to duty in those earlier days of the Confederacy.

Immediately after the secession of the States of Florida and Alabama, the navy yard, forts, and other government property upon the mainland in the vicinity of Pensacola were taken possession of by the State troops, the United States forces retiring to Fort Pickens, on Santa Rosa Island, opposite.

This fort, already strong, was strengthened and its garrison increased by the United States government. In addition to the garrison inside the fort, a regiment known as Wilson's Zouaves was stationed on the island about half a mile eastward of the fort to guard it from a land attack. It was also under the protection of the guns of the blockading squadron, and was quite formidable.

Early in 1861 Gen. Bragg, in command of all the Confederate forces in the vicinity, began organizing them, and by the middle of summer they numbered several thousand. Among these troops was the Fifth Georgia Regiment, commanded by Col. John K. Jackson, and recruited principally from the very best elements of the Empire State. Company A of this regiment, the Clinch Rifles, commanded by Capt. Charles A. Platt, was nearly one hundred strong, proficient in drill, and well equipped, being armed with Mississippi rifles with saber bayonets. Its uniform was dark green, trimmed with gold lace and brass buttons. Its splendid appearance was fully equaled by its fighting qualities. Alas! how few of that noble band were left in 1865! To the best of my information, only about twenty-five came back to their homes after the war.

My father was then living near Pensacola, and I enlisted in this company, having abandoned my studies at college. Guard duty, daily drill, and dress parade were features of camp life, under which the boys soon began to chafe, clamoring to be led into battle.

On October 7, 1861, the company being assembled for dress parade and drill as usual, the captain, upon taking command, said: "We'll not have any dress parade this evening. I have on hand to-night a very hazardous expedition, and I want from this company sixteen volunteers; and I do not want any man to go who is not willing to die to-night, if necessary." The company was standing at "order arms." "Now," continued he, "those of you who are willing to go will bring your guns to 'shoulder arms.'" If he had given the command "Shoulder arms," the order could not have been more promptly and completely obeyed.

"Well," said he, "I can't take you all, as I should like to do; so I'll be compelled to make a detail." He then selected ten men from the right of the company, who were, of course, the tallest men. Then, after reflection, the captain said: "This is not giving the little men a chance." Whereupon he proceeded down the line, selecting a man here and there, until the number was completed. Being one of the "little men," I was near to the left end of the rear

rank. My heart thrilled with delight when he pointed his finger at me and said, "You," and I proudly stepped to the front with the others. I really did not expect it, for I felt that it was an honor to which I was not entitled.

The company was then dismissed and the "elect" ordered to hold themselves in readiness to march at any moment, with forty rounds of cartridges. The camp was a bustle of excitement and preparation. Those detailed were busy getting their arms and accouterments in suitable condition. Some of the boys found a grindstone and ground their saber-bayonets as sharp as butcher knives. Charles E. Staples, one of my messmates, approached me with tears in his eyes, saying: "You are not entitled to this honor. I'll give you twenty-five dollars [Confederate money was then almost as good as gold] to let me go in your place." Think of conquering an army of such soldiers! I replied: "My opportunity is not for sale. I am going."

Speculation was at its highest as to where we were going and what we were to do. Soon after dark we were called out, and the several detachments from the different companies of the regiment were marched to the wharf at Pensacola, where we were joined by a number of other troops, constituting, I learned afterwards, altogether a force of about twelve hundred, commanded by Gen. R. H. Anderson. We were embarked upon a steamboat and two barges which it carried in tow. The steamer was then headed across the bay toward Santa Rosa Island, at a point about two miles eastward of Billy Wilson's camp. The tide being in, the boat and barges were enabled to approach very near the beach, and we landed by wading ashore. Here the command was formed into three columns, one moving along the north beach, commanded by Col. Jackson; one moving along the south (or gulf) beach, commanded by Col. James R. Chalmers, of Mississippi; while the third, commanded by Col. Patton Anderson, of Florida, moved along the center of the island between the two other columns. Our detachment was in Col. Jackson's command.

When all was ready pickets were placed in front, and we marched cautiously toward the Federal camp. After we had proceeded some distance, a body of troops was seen through the darkness coming up in our rear. Excitement was intense. Were they the enemy, and had they discovered us? or were they our men? Upon near approach we could discern the strip of white cloth upon their left arms which was to be our mark to distinguish friend from foe, and they were found to be one of the other columns which in the darkness had lost its way and found itself marching in our track.

A halt and a readjustment having been made, the columns again moved silently toward the doomed camp. A few minutes later a shot was fired in front. Either we were discovered and the enemy's sentinel had thus given the alarm or our pickets had fired upon us. In either case our presence could no longer be concealed. We now marched in line of battle, hurriedly and with less caution. We passed the dead body of the sentinel, who had just been shot by our picket. A moment later, and we were in the camp, from which the Federals fled in great haste, not waiting to dress. Some were captured before they could make their escape. The camp was then burned, for which purpose some of our boys had been provided with matches and canteens of spirits of turpentine. The flames soon lit tip the sky for miles around.

Our object being accomplished, we turned to effect our retreat to our boats, for daylight was approaching and we were within easy range of the men-of-war just outside, while the guns of Fort Pickens were frowning upon us. Our troops, having disbanded to bum the camp, were necessarily in great disorder, and could not now stop to organize. In this manner we had gone only a few steps when we saw glistening in the light of the burning camp a line of bayonets just across our way and only a few yards distant. Some one said: "They are our men." A

volley from them, which killed and wounded some of our men, caused the cry, "They are Yankees!" and the fire was returned by us. Col. Jackson, coming up about this time, gave the order to cease firing, saying: "They are our men." In obedience to his order to form a line, I ran and placed myself on the Colonel's left. One or two others did the same, but most of the men seemed not to hear or understand the Colonel's order. At any rate, it was not obeyed, and the firing was kept up by some of our men, while others were saying: "Don't shoot! They are our men!"

In the meantime the unknown men were pouring a hot fire into us. About this time I saw a man on a mule riding up along the beach, meeting us. He said something to the men nearest him, and instantly several guns were aimed at him and he was ordered off of his mule. He proved to be Maj. (afterwards Brigadier General) Vogdes, commander of the battalion of United States regulars who had been obstructing our march, and he had come to demand our surrender. While we were busy burning the camp the commander of the fort had sent this battalion around on the gulf beach to get in our rear and capture us. His battalion now gave way and fled, leaving the way open for the continuance of our retreat.

One of the boys mounted the mule, while the Major, together with the other prisoners, was taken along with us. We now proceeded as rapidly as we could, carrying such of our wounded as it was possible to move, toward our boats, expecting to have the guns of both the fort and the ships outside open upon us. This, however, they did not do, either from fear of killing their own men or because we were shielded from view by the bushes on the island.

Upon arriving at the boats we found that the tide had receded and they had been moved farther out into the water, in consequence of which we had to wade a considerable distance to reach them. No order had been observed in the retreat from the scene of the battle, and each man waded in and got aboard as soon as he arrived. The steamboat was headed from shore with the two barges behind, read to start as soon as the order was given.

While we were thus embarking, the enemy, who had followed at a safe distance, approached the boats under the protection of the brush and opened fire upon us with their long range guns. We returned the fire, but with little or no effect, as they were, besides being concealed from view, out of range of our guns.

After all had gotten aboard, the order was given to the steamboat to move, when it was discovered that the barges were aground, caused by the receding tide and the added weight of the troops. The situation was critical. We were exposed in a helpless mass to the enemy's fire from their long range guns, while our fire was perfectly harmless to them. The confusion and consternation became greater as the enemy's fire increased. Our commander, Gen. Anderson, was among the wounded. All who could find room had crowded upon the boat to lighten the barges, with the hope of floating them. I was standing on the middle barge and firing in the direction of the enemy's smoke as fast as I could load and shoot. While thus engaged I saw a man who had just waded out from the shore throw his gun up on deck, preparatory to climbing up, when the piece was discharged, the entire load passing through the ankle of a man, terribly mangling the foot and ankle.

The steamer continued to tug at the barges with all her might, but still they would not move. A man on the steamer raised a hatchet to cut the rope by which the barges were attached. Another man standing on a barge, seeing him, raised his gun and said, "If you do, I'll kill you," and he didn't. Finally the barges were discovered to be moving. Slowly, very slowly, we began to recede from the shore and beyond the range of those rifles. Another fear, however,

still beset us, as a rifle ball from one of the ships, or from Fort Pickens, in full view, could send us all to the bottom of the bay. About eleven o'clock we reached the wharf at Pensacola in safety, where we were greeted by crowds of soldiers and citizens, among whom were many ladies with refreshments for the hungry and bandages for the wounded.

I think our loss, including killed, wounded, and missing, was about eighty or eighty-five. Among our killed was young Lieut. A. Nelms, of the McDuffie Rifles, said to have been one of the brightest intellects the State of Georgia ever produced. Among the wounded and captured was Ben Holt, of our company, beloved by all who knew him. I have learned that he was a brother of Mrs. Wallace Screws, of Montgomery. I found myself with no further injury than a bullet hole through my coat and one through my cap.

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