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**ENGAGEMENTS AT ST. JOHNS BLUFF
ST. JOHNS RIVER, FLORIDA
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1862**

By T. FREDERICK DAVIS

Jacksonville was first occupied by Federal troops March 12, 1862, for the purpose of giving aid and comfort to the Union sympathizers of the region. The town was evacuated in less than a month, but a Federal blockade of the St. Johns River was maintained by gunboats of Admiral Du Pont's South Atlantic squadron with their station at a steam sawmill called Mayport Mills, a settlement that grew into the present town of Mayport and from which the name Mayport is derived. The gunboats patrolled the river at will and frequently went up to Jacksonville and beyond to reconnoiter. To prevent this Gen. Joseph Finegan, commander of the Confederate forces in this portion of the state, decided to fortify St. Johns Bluff on the south side of the river some four miles above Mayport Mills as the river runs. The situation was an ideal one for the purpose—a steep promontory rising from the river's edge to an elevation of more than 70 feet, the channel of the river running close inshore at that point.

General Finegan left Tallahassee September 6, 1862, with a detachment of Capt. R. H. Gamble's light artillery and two 12-pounder rifled guns under the command of Lieut. F. L. Villepigue, and two 8-inch howitzers from a battery at St. Marks. At

Reference note. Official reports are extensively used herein; they will be found in the Government publications *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. and *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XIII. Citations of these sources will be abbreviated to O. R. Army or O. R. Navy as the case may be, with name of subscribing officer.

Lake City he was joined by a detachment of the Milton Artillery to work the howitzers and two modern 32-pounder rifled guns that had recently arrived at Lake City. The six guns were placed under the command of Capt. Joseph L. Dunham of the Milton Artillery and reached Jacksonville the next day where they were loaded on flat boats ¹ and towed by the small steamer Governor Milton to St. Johns Bluff ². Captain Dunham's command was supported by three companies commanded by Maj. T. W. Brevard, Capt. John Westcott's company of Partisan Rangers, Capt. Winston Stephens's company of cavalry, and Capt. John C. Richard's company of the First Florida Special Battalion. The guns were placed in position on St. Johns Bluff the night of the 9th, where the ammunition and the whole force had been concentrated without the knowledge of two Federal gunboats anchored off Mayport Mills ³. Sometime during the night of the 9th a contraband ⁴ boarded the Federal gunboat Patroon and notified its commander of the Confederate activities at the Bluff.

September 10-11, 1862. On the 10th just before dark the gunboat Uncas, L. G. Crane, Acting Master, steamed up the river, anchored less than 1000 yards from the Bluff and under cover of night fired nine shells into different parts of the Bluff to feel out the batteries; but they did not reply. At daylight the next morning the batteries opened on the Uncas and the fight was on. The other gunboat, Patroon, W. D. Urann, Acting Master, joined the Uncas. The bombardment lasted four and a half hours, the gunboats firing more than 200 shells, of which it was

1. Brig. Gen. Jos. Finegan, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, p. 121.

2. Com. Chas. Steedman, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, p. 358.

3. Brig. Gen. Jos. Finegan, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, p. 121.

4. The term "contraband" was applied by the Federal forces to slaves who sought the Federal lines.

estimated 90 broke at or near the Confederate batteries. Then Confederates concentrated their fire on the *Uncas*, the larger and better vessel, and that it was not destroyed was a miracle, for a shell pierced the hull just above the water line and entered the magazine, but did not explode; another went through the pilot house; a third through the wind sail above the ward room, and others carried away running gear, crane, &c⁵. With all of this there were no casualties aboard the gunboats. The crippled *Uncas* and the *Patroon* withdrew to their station at Mayport Mills.

At the Confederate batteries one man was killed and eight slightly wounded. Capt. J. H. McRory, acting engineer officer (who probably designed the batteries), was severely wounded by his own bayonet in a fall down an embankment. The bombardment resulted in no damage to the works or guns. General Finegan in his report said: "Captain Dunham, in command, behaved with great coolness and bravery, as did also Captain-Richard, commanding a section of the heavy guns; Lieutenant Villepigue, commanding a section of Gamble's battery; Lieutenant [Charles F.] Stevens, of Milton Artillery, commanding section of heavy guns, and Lieut. T. E. Buckman, ordinance officer, acting adjutant of the command, to whom much credit is due. . . . My assistant adjutant-general, Captain [Wilkinson] Call, who accompanied the expedition, rendered efficient service throughout."⁶

Anticipating another attack, General Finegan immediately sent to St. Johns Bluff four 8-inch smoothbore cannon that had been brought from the upper St. Johns. River⁷, thus increasing the strength of the batteries to ten guns-six 8-inch smoothbore per-

5. Act'g. Master L. G. Crane, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, p. 325.

6. Brig. Gen. Jos. Finegan, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, pp. 121-122.

7. Brig. Gen. Jos. Finegan, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, pp. 120-121.

haps more or less antiquated; two modern 32-pounders (4.6 inch) and two field pieces. The guns were not confined to a single battery; besides a main battery several units were scattered over the bluff⁸.

Upon receipt of information concerning the engagement of the 11th, Admiral Du Pont despatched three additional gunboats to the St. Johns⁹. These arrived on the 16th and joined the *Uncas* (now repaired) and *Patroon* off Mayport Mills.

September 17, 1862. At 6 a. m. of the 17th the flotilla comprising the gunboats *Paul Jones*, *Cimarron*, *Hale*, *Uncas* and *Patroon* under the command of Commander Charles Steedman, U.S.N., weighed anchor for St. Johns Bluff. The *Paul Jones* opened the engagement at 2000 yards and was joined by the others as they came up. The Confederate batteries remained silent until the gunboats came to 1600 yards, when they commenced a quick and well-directed fire. For five hours the Bluff was bombarded with a shower of projectiles, the batteries replying until the last hour when they ceased¹⁰ probably because the gunboats moved out of range. There is no evidence that the batteries were silenced by the Federal fire as Commander Steedman surmised at the time.

General Finegan's detailed report of the fight has not been found; all that is officially known from the Confederate side is contained in his brief preliminary despatch: "On the morning of the 17th five gunboats engaged the battery at St. John's Bluff and continued the engagement for five hours, when they retired. Our loss, 2 killed and 3 wounded. The enemy, having failed to pass our batteries, may attempt a land attack. . . ." ¹¹

8. See *O. R. Navy* p. 365.

9. Rear-Adm'l. S. F. Du Pont, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, p. 327.

10. Com. Chas. Steedman, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, pp. 329-330.

11. Brig. Gen. Jos. Finegan, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, p. 122.

Damage to the gunboats is indicated by Commander Steedman in his report. Discussing the apparent character of the guns used by the Confederates, he said: ". . . .one gun, which from its range and the size of a hole made in the smokestack of this vessel [the *Paul Jones*] I should say was a 32-pounder, rifled. That gun was fired at intervals, and then only when this vessel or the *Cimarron* was above the entrance to Sister's Creek, this being the range mark of those who served it; the *Cimarron* and this vessel bear evidence of that fact."¹² There was no loss of life aboard the gunboats.

Firm in the belief that a combined land and naval attack would follow, General Finegan made arrangements to meet it. The entire force at St. Johns Bluff and vicinity was placed under the command of Lieut. Col. Charles F. Hopkins, C.S.A. At the same time plans were made to fortify Yellow Bluff (now New Berlin), five mile above St. Johns Bluff on the opposite side of the river, and Captain Dunham was assigned for the purpose. The troops hitherto concentrated in the foothills in the rear of St. Johns Bluff were assigned new positions with outposts at Mt. Pleasant Creek, Greenfield, and an observation post at the old lighthouse in the rear of Mayport Mills¹³.

In the meantime Admiral Du Pont had had a conference with the military authorities when it was decided to send a combined naval and land force to the St. Johns. Consequently on September 30 the transports *Boston*, *Ben DeFord*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Neptune* left Hilton Head with the 47th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, Col. T. H. Good; 7th Regiment Connecticut Volunteers, Col. J. R. Hawley; section of 1st Connecticut Light Battery, Lieutenant

12. Com. Chas. Steedman, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, p. 330.

13. Lieut. Col. Chas. F. Hopkins, C. S. A., *O. R. Army* pp. 138-140.

Cannon, and a detachment of 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, Captain Chase, comprising 1573 men in all under the command of Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan. The expedition reached the St. Johns the next day (Oct. 1) and anchored off Mayport Mills, where it found a flotilla commanded by Commander Charles Steedman, U.S.N., comprising the gunboats *Paul Jones*, flagship; *Cimarron*, *Water Witch*, *Hale*, *Uncas* and *Patroon*¹⁴.

October 1-3, 1862. Soon after the arrival of the transports the gunboats *Cimarron*, *Water Witch* and *Uncas* steamed up the river. When they arrived abreast of Sister's Creek the Confederate batteries on St. Johns Bluff opened a heavy fire on them "the missiles striking all around the *Cimarron*, their fuzes being so accurately timed that the explosion of the shells threw the water on our decks".¹⁵ This engagement lasted an hour and a half, when the gunboats withdrew and anchored out of range to cover the landing of the Federal troops at Mayport Mills, which was completed by nine o'clock that night. About midnight General Brannan changed his plans; the troops were again embarked and effected a landing at 2 a. m. (Oct. 2) from Buckhorn Creek (a small creek just west of the mouth of Pablo Creek), thence across the marsh a quarter of a mile to firm land a mile north of Greenfield. The landing continued throughout the forenoon and early afternoon, when the advance began. The Confederate outposts were abandoned in haste. The Federals advanced rapidly and by night had reached Mt. Pleasant Creek landing where they camped, only two or three miles from the Confederate batteries on St. Johns Bluff¹⁶.

14. Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan, U. S. A., *O. R. Army*, p. 129.

15. Com. M. Woodhull, U. S. N., *O. R. Navy*, p. 356.

16. Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan, U. S. A., *O. R. Army*, pp. 129-130.

Colonel Hopkins's scouts had kept him informed of the Federal movements, but had magnified the strength to 3000 men. During the previous night 110 dismounted Florida cavalry from Yellow Bluff joined Colonel Hopkins and with this reinforcement the Confederate force, all branches, did not exceed 600 men. Confronted by this situation Colonel Hopkins called a conference of his officers at which it was unanimously decided to retreat. At 9 p. m. (Oct. 2) (the batteries were abandoned, (the retreat being conducted with such order that the enemy did not find it out until the afternoon of the next day). There being no means of transportation except one wagon, only a small amount of ammunition was removed from St. Johns Bluff ¹⁷.

During the morning of October 3 the Federal artillery was landed at the Mt. Pleasant Creek camp. All being in readiness for a general attack, the gunboats moved up to engage the batteries, but receiving no reply a boat was sent ashore and the U.S. flag hoisted over the abandoned works. In his report General Brannan described the Confederate works as follows: "I found the late position of the enemy oh St. John's Bluff to be one of great strength, and possessing a heavy and effective armament, with a good supply of ammunition . . . the works being most skillfully and carefully constructed. . . . Most of the guns were mounted on a complete traverse circle, . . . " ¹⁸ The guns captured were two 8-inch columbiads, two 8-inch smooth bore, two 8-inch howitzers, and the two 32-pounder (4.6 inch) rifled guns ¹⁹ that had been so effective against the gunboats. All of these guns were removed to

17. Lieut. Col. Chas. F. Hopkins, C. S. A., *O. R. Army*, pp. 141-142.

18. Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan, U. S. A., *O. R. Army*, pp. 129-130.

19. Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan, U. S. A., *O. R., Army*, p. 125. Some time previously the two field pieces of Gamble's Battery had been sent across the river (probably to Yellow Bluff)-Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, Oct. 14, 1862.

Hilton Head. The magazines were destroyed and the works razed²⁰.

The occupation of Jacksonville was now decided upon. A letter written by Capt. Valentine Chamberlain of the 7th Connecticut Volunteers upon his return to Hilton Head from the St. Johns River expedition contains much valuable information about this occupation of Jacksonville not found in the published reports as well as a description of the town in a period of the war for which contemporary record is extremely scarce. The letter is here published entire with the consent of Frederick S. Chamberlain, Esq., of New Britain, Conn., son of Captain Chamberlain.

²⁰. Brig. Gen. J. M. Brannan, U. S. A., *O. R. Army*, p. 130.