

1958

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Recommended Citation

Larkin, J. L. (1958) "Battle of Santa Rosa Island," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 37 : No. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol37/iss3/11>

BATTLE OF SANTA ROSA ISLAND

by J. L. LARKIN

PRESUMABLY as an attempt to take Fort Pickens, though this was denied by the Confederates, an attack was made on the night of October 9 (1861) on the encampment of Federal troops on Santa Rosa Island east of the fort.

Shortly after midnight a select force of 1200 men under the command of General Richard H. Anderson succeeded in crossing the bay in two small wood-burning steamers and landed on the north beach of Santa Rosa Island about four miles east of Fort Pickens.

The force was divided into three groups of about 400 men each. They were then formed in three columns, the first under the command of Colonel James R. Chalmers, on the north or right hand side of the island along the bay. The second column was headed by Colonel J. P. Anderson on the south or left hand side of the island along the Gulf. The third column was to act as the reserve, or support, column and was to advance in the same direction, but slightly behind the two flank columns so as to be deployed either to the right, or left, as the situation may demand. It was commanded by Colonel John J. Jackson.

The general direction of the movement was west toward the tip of the island where Ft. Pickens was held by the Union forces. The advance was begun at 2:15 A. M. While tactically sound and well planned, two weaknesses manifest themselves almost from the outset. First, the forces were not Infantry forces trained in night fighting and movement. Second, lack of communications hampered the movement with a resulting lack of coordination. Since secrecy was all-important even contact by voice was out of the question.

The Southern forces proceeded quietly and cautiously for about three miles and about 3:30 in the morning they made contact with the camp of the Sixth Regiment, New York Volunteers. The ill-trained militia was literally caught in their tents, without even so much as a sentinel or picket to warn of the sudden attack. The Confederate militia quickly moved in to disperse the Federals and captured and burned the camp. All was going well except the Federal Garrison had been alerted.



ONE OF THE BORTIAN BATTERIES JUST BRACED ON SANTA ROSA ISLAND TO SUPPORT FORT PICKENS, BUILT BY LIEUTENANT TIDBALL.

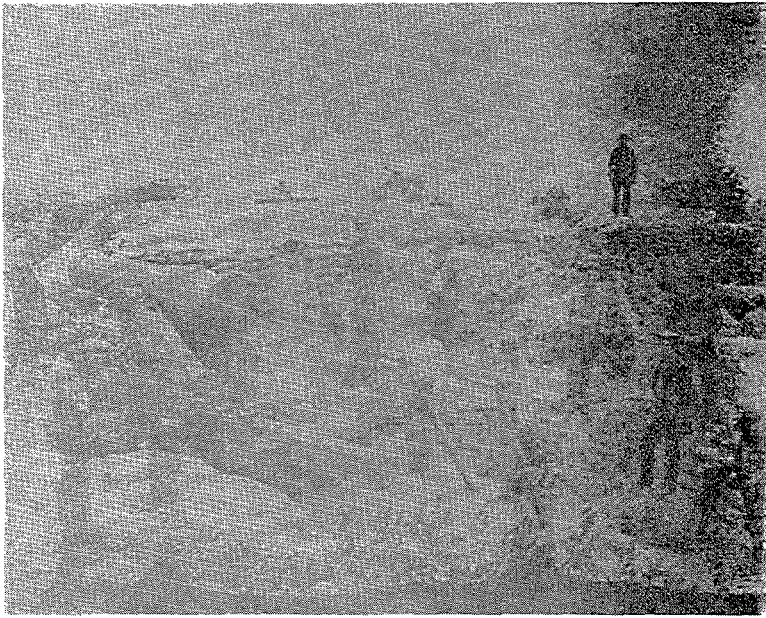
(Harper's Weekly)

After this initial encounter, the Confederates under General Anderson halted apparently with the hope of taking up a defensive position and lure the Federal garrison out of the bastions of the fort. As soon as the first fugitives of the routed New York militia reached the other Union batteries in the confines of the fort, Colonel Harvey Brown, Union commander, detached three companies of regulars and an artillery battery, under the command of Major Israel Vogdes. The counter-attacking force proceeded along the north beach of the island where it was joined by a company of the Sixth New York Volunteers which was to protect the right flank of the northern force as it moved along the beach.

However, inexperience again reared its ugly head. The protecting flank guard became detached and lost in the darkness of the dunes and was not seen again during the entire encounter.

Meanwhile, the main body under the command of Major Vogdes continued its march east along the beach of the island in search of the Confederates. At a point somewhat beyond the original skirmish at the camp of the New York Volunteers, a large Confederate force appeared on the unprotected right and rear flanks. In the darkness the Union detachment had marched by, and to the rear, of the attacking Confederate forces! There was imminent danger of being cut off from the fort some three miles to the west and rear. Major Vogdes, with his small force of about one hundred men, then executed a swinging movement to the right, or south, across the island to keep a wedge from being driven between them and being forced down the island away from the forts. They held their ground for a short while but a withering fire from superior Confederate forces caused them to fall back in a large circle that forced them to a point across the island to the south or Gulf side. Near the start of this movement Major Vogdes became lost and was captured by the Confederates. In the new location the Federals took up protective positions behind the sand dunes and delivered a most effective fire into the ranks of the Southern forces causing them to fall back to the north at the edge of the bay.

At about 5:00 A.M. Colonel Brown dispatched an artillery battery and an infantry company commanded by Major L. G. Arnold to support the Vogdes detachment which was now under the command of Captain Hildt. Arnold found the small Union force putting up a bitter fight with the enemy. Light arms fire



CONFEDERATE BATTERY OPPOSITE FT. PICKENS
(From a much faded photograph)

was heavy but largely ineffective because of the excellent cover in the dunes and the lack of light in the early morning hours.

About this time the Confederate line disengaged themselves and fell back, retreating with great rapidity to the east along the north beach of the island. The Union forces assisted by Major Arnold's support forces pursued the retreating Confederates and could have no doubt wiped them out had they not taken time to reorganize for a final assault. The Confederates were not again overtaken until they were completing embarkation where they had landed about six hours before. The Union forces immediately attacked the hastily departing Southerners but the attack was ineffective.

The reason for the impromptu departure by the Confederates was a report by a fisherman that the U. S. gunboat attached to Fort Pickens was making its way up the bay to attack the unprotected transports laying at anchor a short distance off-shore. With the approach of daybreak, rendering the ships entirely visible, the only alternative of General Anderson was to with-

draw as rapidly as possible. This he did before the U. S. Navy gunboat could reach the scene of action.

The exact strength of the Federal garrison on Santa Rosa Island is not known, but it can be estimated at approximately 600 men, but only about two thirds of that number were actually engaged in defense of the position. The total Confederate force was in the neighborhood of 1,200 men, but this number had been divided into three groups, and because of absence of communication facilities and lack of coordinated command there were not over 500 troops brought into effective action.

The total admitted losses by the respective commands were: Union 67, Confederate 87. Major Vogdes of the Federal forces was captured by the Confederates and General Anderson, leader of the ill-fated Southern attack, was gravely wounded. The Confederates realizing the difficulty of an assault on Fort Pickens made no further attempts during the entire War. In fact, later in the War it was not uncommon to see Federal soldiers of the Pickens garrison trading in the towns of Warrington and Woolsey for vegetables and poultry.

The next powder was burned in Pensacola harbor on November 22-23, 1861, when heavy artillery in Fort Pickens supplemented with fire from U. S. Navy warships laid down a two-day bombardment against Southern forces in Fort McRee, Fort Barrancas, and the Navy Yard. The return fire proved ineffective and Fort McRee was silenced as a result of the severe punishment from the combined guns of Pickens and the Union warships. The towns Woolsey and Warrington adjoining the Navy Yard were set afire.

On May 8, 1862, the hard-pressed Confederates in the North ordered Pensacola evacuated to reinforce their armies in other areas. This left Fort Pickens and the forts near Key West and Fort Monroe, Virginia, the only forts within the Confederacy to fly the stars and stripes during the entire war.